

## ON MARGIN, CULTURE AND IDENTITY : THE CASE OF OTHER-ED WRITINGS IN CANADA AND INDIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In recent years, theories on marginality have focussed on issues of displacement, liminality, diaspora, domination and subjugation. In this upsurge of marginality, the discourse of post colonialism foregrounds the need for recognising identities and voices that were denied during the colonial days. Said, Bhabha, Fanon, Spivak, Jan Mohammad and a host of others have questioned the margin as an ideological construct and contributed to the growing discourse on post colonialism. It is the margin that creates the voice of resistance and space for articulating their lived realities. In doing so, most minority writers in Canada, be it Afro-Caribbean, Immigrants or Natives have felt the necessity to rewrite themselves for the rightful place / space in Canadian Society. A similar proposition is visible in the writings by Dalits and Denotified Tribes in India. It has mapped the process of its existence from the trajectory of subjugation to survival. Writing becomes a means for assertion as well as negation. In this paper it is proposed to examine marginality as a theoretical construct to negotiate the selected novels of both Native Canadian writers and Dalit writers of India.*

**Key words:** *Family, Educational environment & Achievement of the child.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, theories on marginality have focussed on issues of displacement, liminality, diaspora, domination and subjugation. In this upsurge of marginality, the discourse of post colonialism foregrounds the need for recognising identities and voices that were denied during the colonial days. Said, Bhabha, Fanon, Spivak, Jan Mohammad and a host of others have questioned the margin as an ideological construct and contributed to the growing discourse on post colonialism. It is the margin that creates the voice of resistance and space for articulating their lived realities. In

doing so, most minority writers in Canada, be it Afro-Caribbean, Immigrants or Natives have felt the necessity to rewrite themselves for the rightful place / space in Canadian Society. A similar proposition is visible in the writings by Dalits and Denotified Tribes in India. It has mapped the process of its existence from the trajectory of subjugation to survival. Writing becomes a means for assertion as well as negation. In this paper it is proposed to examine marginality as a theoretical construct to negotiate the selected novels of both Native Canadian writers and writers from the lowest strata of Hindu Indian society.

Marginalized group often face complex choices in defining and enacting their own identities. They may choose, or feel compelled, to assimilate to the norms and values of the dominant group, thus abandoning alternative identities, or at least judging them by the standards of the dominant group as illustrated in Elias' example above, and weakening the collective ties which had defined them as a group in the first place. Alternatively, they may choose to emphasise a separate identity in contrast to dominant norms and to act this out as demonstrably as possible, drawing individual pride and collective strength from such defiance. Such a stance may run the risk of increasing the isolation of marginalized groups and prompting a repressive backlash from the dominant group if it feels its power is threatened. It may also produce a new set of dominant norms within the marginalized for those members who are unable or unwilling to comply. In reality, most marginalized people steer a path between these two extremes developing a multifaceted identity and negotiating complex relationships with a wide variety of individuals and groups.

As we read Native writing we do find different parallels with respect to other marginal/ post colonial discourses. For instance the discourse on black writing, feminism and other indigenous forms of different settler colonies are similar to the issues and themes of Native writing. These themes rest on the principle of difference – as they are not in tandem with mainstream White discourses. Said traces in Western representations of African difference 'a systematic language for dealing with and study Africa for the West', which figures Africa as a primitive vitality and includes the great colonialist texts on Africa – Conrad, Paton, IsakDinesan. Toni Morrison also

employs *Africanism* as "a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, reading and misreading that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (45). Jan Mohammed's 'The Manichean Allegory' shows how the kind of literature that he names 'specular' fixes the Native "as a mirror that reflects the colonialist's self-image." Apart from its use in legitimating the discourses of slavery and colonialism, Africanism has largely been used by Europe to define itself in opposition to an African alterity. If the slave must be dehumanised to elevate the European master, colonised must be primitivised for creating the civilising Saviour. Invariably, the African 'darkness' has been put into the service of Europe's narcissistic preoccupations. In the representation of the African as the Dark Other threatening the European, Chinua Achebe rightly detects a "desire – one might say the need in Western psychology to set Africa as a foil to Europe, a place of negation.

In this upsurge of marginality, the discourse on post colonialism foregrounds the need for recognizing identities and voices that were denied during the colonial days. Further it is a discourse which brings in the question of race, ethnicity, gender, class, eurocentricism as well as condition of marginality, migration and minoritization. Theorists like Said who talk about Orientalism or Bhabha's concept of ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity, or O'Manoni&Memmi's work on *Psychology of Colonialism* are important in understanding the predicament of marginal groups including the Native people.

### **Voices of Dissent from the Margins :**

The Native Movement of the post 1960s was

an important step towards the re-definition of the Native people. It was an attempt to make the Natives realise their past and traditional histories as a means to contest their received status in White discourse and discursive practices. Like the other movements such as Black Power Movement or Feminist Movement, the American Indian Movement too was a movement for the upliftment of its Native people by engendering self pride and dignity in them. The Movement also questioned the received hierarchies and power structures of the dominant order. With an element of strong vehemence and protest involved, it called for a re-examination of the position of the Native in the dominant White order. Past and history were the two chief modes of regaining this lost identity. The resurgence of Native nationalism called for a Native world view of life untainted by White metaphors or cultural symbols.

This period of Native nationalism engendered group-consciousness, solidarity, re-claiming rights and treaties and necessitated another perspective among the Native people. Thomas King and Louise Erdrich, for instance as will be seen in chapter two explore the cross cultural problems like Native rights and race relations while incorporating critical Native issues within narrative structure. The narrative set in the present time recollects a wealth of stories and characters from Native history. In their depiction of the Native history, there is a constant flux and circular vision which is part of Native world view. By going back to their past/history the writers need to assert continuity/interrelatedness of Native world view also gets realised.

Dalit writing is a post-Independence literary phenomenon. The emergence of Dalit literature has a great historical significance. The cause and

effect leading to the age-old existence of oppression and despair of the lives of marginalized class of nation's vast population are also observed in many other parts of the world.

Arjun Dangle has defined Dalit literature as: "Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India... It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science. Thus finally ending as revolutionary."

Most of the marginalized groups all over the world have a similar system of oppression but the titles are different as per the class and class divide. In India it was under the pretext of the Caste and in the western World it was under the name of the Race. Inequality was the main source of this marginality which led to insecurity, injustice and exploitation. Marginalized sections were always on the periphery and distanced from the power centres. In this research work the main objective is to draw similarities between the politics of Caste and Race in Indian Dalit and the American Blacks.

Dalit literature is experience based. This '*anubhava*' (experience) takes precedence over '*anumana*' (speculation). Thus to dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal. Authenticity and truthfulness have become hallmarks of dalit literature. These writers make use of the language of the out-castes and under-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the stuff of dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of the dalit writers has become sharp and sensitive. These writers make a fervent plea for a complete overhaul of the society. That's why Sharankumar Limbale

said, "Dalit literature considers human as a centre. ... There is no pain of 'I' but pain of ignored society as a whole" (Gupta 15). The literary dalits present their search for identity.

### **Difference between Caste and Race**

As far as Dalits are concerned casteism is both a religious phenomenon as well as a form of economic exploitation while in Canada ethnic discrimination is rooted more in economic exploitation. Traditionally, the caste system of stratification in India was legitimized through classical Hindu religious texts, especially as interpreted by Brahmans (Sekhona). The caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification given by the Vedas. The Purushasukta hymn of Rigveda describes that caste came into existence from different parts of the Purusha, the cosmic soul- the Brahmins came out of his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Viashyas from his thighs, and the surdas from his feet. Another justification derives from the theory of Karma which says that caste is based on birth. It supports the argument that people of the lower castes have to blame themselves for their troubles and low status because of their bad karma in their past life. Since one of the main beliefs in Hinduism is that the consequences of your past actions determine your present state, reincarnation plays a huge role in the prevention of people revolting against the caste system. Reincarnation bolsters caste oppression in two ways. It justifies and discourages hope for progress from this life to the next life. Reincarnation justifies high class birth of the Brahmans on the basis of the virtuous deeds done by them in their past lives while the Surdas and untouchables have earned their sufferings through sinful acts in their past lives. In order to

avoid a low caste birth in their next life, Hindu who are born as Surdas or untouchables learned to support rather than oppose their own oppression (Deshpande S. Manali). However in Canada, discrimination against Halfbreeds is the result of history which includes the processes of conquest, colonialism, state building, migration and economic development, and the institutional racism which accompanied them. Noel Elizabeth Currie asserts, "Europeans constructed different 'races' they encountered in their colonialist and imperialist ventures as 'inferior' and 'savage' in order to exploit them economically; racism provided a justification, after the fact, for that exploitation" (Lundgren).

For the marginalised people the question of 'voice' and 'being' is important to counter the inappropriate image of themselves. This voice is not just a voice of dissent or protest but a voice of colonised Native who proposes to recover and reinvent the un-given truth of the Natives in White discourses. In other words, a revisionist view of history is given from the praxis of their mother culture. This revision or recovery of historical facts becomes a necessary political act to contest and the received version of the Native people in the dominant discourse.

### **Thomas King and Ruby Slipperjack**

Thomas King's novel encompasses political contexts which define Canadians against the negative examples of United States history and popular culture, but at the same time situate the First Nation peoples of Canada as other in relation to Euro-Canadian culture. Thus, the positioning of individual characters and groups of characters with respect to the dominant culture is unstable. On occasion, Thomas King's Native characters identify themselves as Canadian. Latisha and George Morningstar – whose name Latisha likes because it sounds



slightly Indian, although George is not (King 143) –articulate the tensions of their marriage in terms of a nationalistic debate focusing the difference between Canadians and U.S Americans. Before George’s psychological imperialism and Latisha’s strained forbearance lead to the collapse of the relationship, Latisha is reduced to whispering in the dark to her infant son “a chant, a mantra, ‘you are a Canadian. You are Canadian’” (176).

Thomas King’s work and his focus on the Canadian –U.S border, provide a useful alternative to the current concerns of border studies by exploring the relevance of the forty-ninth parallel for Native peoples. Certainly what is at stake at the forty-ninth parallel is considerably different from the overt and often deadly policing of the border at the Rio Grande. The economic disparity between Mexicans and Americans also creates a tension that is much less apparent in the case of Canada and the United States, where levels of poverty are quite similar, and basic amenities are often identical. As Clark Blaise describes it, the forty-ninth parallel is more concerned with ‘psychic death’, especially for those who go south of the border (4). Nationalism, in this context, operates on the level of ideological and emotional commitment.

Thomas King’s third novel *Truth and Bright Water* challenges the reader’s abilities at border crossing. Within a narrative set in the present and written in the present tense, King has embedded a wealth of stories and characters from Indian history. Events and names in the narrator’s story reveals events in the tragic history of Indian removals “The book reads history as story and story a history” (Ridington 80). It is set in the border communities of Bright Water a Canadian Indian reserve, and Truth, an

adjacent American railroad town. One side is Native, the other White, but the character cross often, if not easily, from one side to the other. The narrator is a fifteen year old boy whose parents have shop on either side of Division Street in Truth. The actual town that correspond to Truth and Bright Water are Sweet Grass, Montana and Cutis, Alberta.

Slipper jack, Wagamese, and other novelists are revealing a richness that has long been dormant in Canada. Great stories are, indeed, being told. They make valuable contributions to a greater understanding of the Canadian mosaic.

The novel *Silent Words* is divided into twenty chapters with an epilogue in the end. As mentioned earlier due to the influence of the oral tradition, the narrative lacks proper linear development. It moves back and forth, requiring a very careful and attentive reading. The novel opens with Danny in a pathetic state in a state of shock with the poverty, alcohol and violence ridden home. To top it all the inhuman attitude of Sarah, Danny’s step mother results in his leaving home.

This search for the mother is metaphorically the search for mother Native culture that was gradually destroyed by the White order. At the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that the longing for mother remains a live issue among Native children, for they are doomed to foster homes and other agencies with the failure of a balanced family life. The journey therefore undertaken by Danny is a type of ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ to restore back native cultural identity.

To impart a true sense of native identity Slipperjack makes her protagonist undergo a long-canoe trip with Ol’ Jim to relive the pre-contact days. It is here that Danny truly understands the concept of nature as held in Native community. His approach to nature was

different from white perception. To quote Arnold Krupat, Native views on life, “derive from an ecosystem, non anthropocentric perspective which is “certainly rather than marginally important to human survival” (55).

Slipper jack subverts the loss of language by making the silence – the absence of Ojibway language – speak. Other aspects of Ojibway culture must fill this gap. One of these is pedagogy. Danny undergoes a learning process in which he acquires experimental knowledge and realises the value of sharing and community. He begins to understand the First Nations expression, “all my relations”, and his father later reminds him that his Ojibway community is “like one big family” (244).

Through non-verbal communications, Ol’Jim encourages Danny to cultivate his awareness. Unlike verbal language, the language of silence is non-intrusive, non-directive, and non-authorisation. He often does not tell Danny how to interpret these lessons, but allows him to discover their meaning for himself. Impatience impeded awareness, and both awareness and memory are essential to survival:

You (Danny) rush too much, you know that?...you should take time to look around and remember how things are, son. Would you remember how things are, son. Would you remember how we got here if you had to do the trip all over again without me? (129).

First Nations language, oral traditions, and histories are passed from one generation to the next through social and individual memories. As Ol’Jim explains, Elders play a pedagogical role because they educate the young through their stories, lives, and actions; thus, this process of remembrance contributes to the survival of First

Nations (143-44).

Throughout the text, Slipper Jack illustrates the complex web between memory, history, and land. As she points out to Lutz, land is central to First Nations subject formation because it is their history (Lutz 207); land is an integral part of their stories, lifestyle, traditions and culture(s) generally.

### **Joseph Macwan and Omprakash Valmiki**

*Angaliyat* works on four levels. It is a gripping tale of love, heroism, humiliation, revenge and death. It is a vividly coloured picture of the lives of two neighbouring villages in the Charotar district of central Gujarat. It is a document of the politics of the pre- and post-Independence years, as seen from the perspective of the downtrodden; and finally, it is an account of the struggle of one dalit community against its upper-caste oppressors, spurred on by two opposing ideologies, the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite.

As the dominance on dalits prevails in India, the repression on Black America. In India, this dominance is based on the birth which is not in human hands. In the same way, in America, this repression is based on the colour of the skin, which is also out of the human reach. In the name of racism, these Black Americans were victimized. Robert Blauner believes, racism is “a principle of social domination by which a group seen as inferior of different in alleged biological characteristics is exploited, controlled and oppressed socially and physically by a super ordinate group” (Blauner 26). Another critic of African American literature, Tzvetan Todorov puts forward the definition of racism,

“Racism” is the name given to a type of behavior which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people

on account of physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself (Todorov 370).

*Angaliyatis* is a saga which elaborates two opposite situations; the first one, in which most of the dalit community members are ready to accept the otherness in their own country and the second one, in which they wake up to protest, to challenge this unjustified otherness. The element of this protest has been in Macwan's life and so his characters in the novel are drawn with the same colours of protest. This is the tale of struggle between two different communities of one particular region. One community is well-equipped, alert and powerful whereas the other one which is confronting this community is downtrodden, deprived of all.

Macwan believes that the dalit community itself needs reformation and it needs to shed the load of the evils and so he depicts his beliefs through some individuals who protested against the old fashioned customs, cultural belief, rigid mentality, conditioned mind set up etc. Teeha protested not only to change the attitude of the upper castes but also for the cultivation of values in the dalits. He doesn't give '*pretbhojan*' - a feast to the villagers after the death of this mother as it has been a ritual of the community. According to Teeha, some rituals like '*pretbhojan*' have no ground for logical understanding. He is in a way more rational.

In the course of the novel, the theme of search for self identity and quest for freedom is depicted through many characters like Teeha and Methi, Kanku and Daan, and other major characters. Dhirendra Mehta, a critic of Joseph Macwan, says, "*Angaliyat* is a tale of men who are struggling to maintain their identity as human beings" (Mehta 231). In order to protest against intense casteism, the dalits have to

willingly be ready to lay down their lives. Teeha and his group are prepared for the ultimate sacrifice. After the death of Teeha, Bhavaankaka proclaims, "Don't blame the Swaraj, Master, blame the human heart. Till Ram inhabits the human heart, Ramrajya will be a distant dream. And I feel the death of a single Valji or a single Teeha cannot bring that *rajya*. Many more Valji and Teeha will have to die like this. Our eyes will not open otherwise." (229)

Both the authors, having experienced marginality and suffering – psychologically, socially, and politically – have drawn the sketches of their own experiences with the use of words. Their literary expressions are revolt against oppressions which they experience in their lives and which they watch in their people too. Whether the victims are the Blacks of America or the Dalits of India, they have to suffer due to their place in the margin. They are not allowed any space in the page. About the African writing, Waghmare notes, "African history has given them a full page, but American history has given only small and narrow margin on its page" (Waghmare 21). This is true not only for the African American literature but also for the Dalit literature as the dalits have also been kept aside forcefully from the main stream by the upper castes.

Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* presents those experiences that did not find a place in literary representation as Valmiki writes in his preface. Experiences like Valmiki's, his birth and growing up in the untouchable caste of Chuhra, the heroic struggle that he waged to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject and recorder of the exploitation and oppression he endured.

The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community which not only had to rely on Joothan but also relished it. Valmiki gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating Joothan. His memories of being assigned to guard the drying Joothan from crows, chicken and of his relishing the dried and reprocessed Joothan burn him with vehement pain and humiliation in the present.

*Joothan* demands a radical shift from the upper caste and upper class reader by insisting that such a reader not forget his/her caste or class privilege. Unlike canonical Hindi or English writing where the reader's or writer's caste or class is often considered irrelevant. *Joothan's* dual problematises the reader's caste and class. While Valmiki irony, satire and anger are directed at non Dalit readers, Dalit readers are seen as fellow sufferers. While we is demarcated to we Dalits in the text the upper caste and upper class by the is distanced by the use of pronouns 'they' and 'them'. Valmiki does not claim the authority to address a nation collectively on the contrary he aims to point out the exclusion of people like him from the imagined community of the nation (xxxvii).

Dalit Literature serves as a point of departure to the established meta-narratives of religion myth and history notwithstanding the heterogeneity which marks any literary discourse as a collective unit discourse Dalit literature distinguishes itself by resistance to the mythic Indian consciousness. Writers like Om Prakash Valmiki, Ram Lallyee Periyal Singh and Sharankumar Limbale seek an alternative construction of Dalit identity. The Dalit narrator relives these traumatic experiences again, but this time to go past them by understanding them in an ethical framework and passing judgment on them, something that the child could not do.

By documenting these experiences of the Dalit child, first by theatric alizing them so that we see them in the ethical language of guilt and responsibility, from the perspective of the victim, Valmiki and the other Dalit writers break through the wall of silence and denial behind which the Dalit suffering had been hidden. Valmiki's encounters with his various school teachers show how Dalit children are abused verbally, physically and publicly, without anyone coming to their rescue.

Valmiki place his and his Dalit friends' encounters with upper caste teacher in the context of the Brahmin teacher Dronacharya tricking his low caste disciple Eklavya into cutting his thumb and presenting it to him as part of his gurudakshina or teacher's tribute. This is a famous incident in the *Mahabharata*. By doing this, Dronacharya ensured that Eklavya, the better student of archery, could never complete against Arjun, the Kshatriya disciple. Indeed having lost his thumb, Eklavya could no longer perform archery. In high caste telling, the popular story presents a casteless Eklavya as the exemplar of an obedient disciple rather than the Brahmin Dronacharya as perfidious and biased teacher. When Valmiki's father goes to the school and calls the headmaster a Dronacharya, he links the twentieth-century caste relation to those that prevailed two thousand years ago.

Pitaji snatched the broom from my hand and threw it away. His eyes were blazing. Pitaji who was always taut as a bowstring in front of other was so angry that his dense moustache was fluttering. He began to scream, 'Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?'...

I have never forgotten the courage and the fortitude with which my father confronted the headmaster that day. Pitaji had all sort of



weakness, but the decisive turn that he gave my future that day has had a great impact on my personality. (2010:6)

By showing his father's ability to deconstruct the story, Valmiki portrays Dalit as articulate subjects who have seen through the cherished myths of their oppressors. Equating the biased and oppressive teacher with the iconic Dronacharya Valmiki's father pares down the elevated hallowed pedagogical ideologies from the epic to a discourse subject to favouritism and casteism. While the education system is debilitating for the Dalits, Valmiki pays tribute to the Dalit intellectuals who help nurture the growth of the Dalit consciousness in him. While one of these is his father who has the temerity to name the headmaster a Dronacharya, another is Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu ('Jigyasu' means 'curious' and is an acquired identity after shedding a caste-based one) whose rendering of Ambedkar's life is put into Valmiki's hands by his friend Hemlal. The book helps Valmiki, helping him find voice from a state of muted agony. He further shows how Hindi Literature fails to adequately express the hardships he has to face on a regular basis. The poem of Maithili Sharan Gupta which struck a popular chord with the reader fails to find resonance in Valmiki's life as the idyllic landscape that are romantically eulogized in the poems don't register with his shattered sensibilities constantly battered with oppression and hard-work.

### **Conclusion**

The mid-twentieth century saw the rise and visibility of marginal groups in varied discourses. Many of these voices belong to the indigenous people who have survived "European colonisation and cognitive

imperialism" (Battiste xvi). These voices from being victims of empire and silenced in the social sciences have fought back in the 1960s. They have not only resisted colonisation in thought and action but also attempted to restore indigenous knowledge and heritage. For them writing is an attempt to heal their people, restore their dignity and apply fundamental human rights to their communities.

Foucault has made us aware that all writings are political acts. Native literature is not in exception. This is visible in Native writing that calls for empowerment, resisting oppression, asserting identity and moving beyond survival. The political undertone in their writing begins from denouncing the 'White' to the rejecting the presence of dominant group. It goes in tandem within the same principle that White writings engage in. In other words as the White, the native writers too don't clarify the presence of their specific community.

Like other minority groups, the native too have been neglected in the dominant discourse and discursive practices. Except for few anthologies that have accommodated non-white writers for the purpose of political correctness, the majority of books on Canadian Literature are White-centred. In other words these minority writings have been relegated to the position of the other-ed writing. Such an elitist perception of Canadian Literature itself is against the multicultural policy of Canada. This us-them hegemonic divide has seriously affected their rightful place/ space in Canadian world of letters.

Many of these contemporary indigenous writers challenge non-indigenous writers' way of seeing and subsequently writing about

indigenous people. Contemporary indigenous writers positively and knowledgeably construct aspects of their cultures that have been previously misrepresented by outsiders who knew little about the cultures about which they wrote. In this way, indigenous writers following the example the Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* significantly challenge literary trends. Writing from places of strength – their own specific cultures- these writers provide an abundance of new ways to see and thus understand indigenous peoples.

The question on margin has been interrogated within the context of social structures that led to classification in the name of religion, race, region, community, caste, gender, nationality and even ideology. This led to the larger concern in what ways the margin/marginalised can speak having remained mute for a long time. With the onslaught of various socio political movements the margin is no longer mute but can speak for its rightful position. This is clearly visible in the writings of Native Canadians as well as the Dalits in India. They are contributing to the discourse of defining both the Native identity as well as the Dalit identity within the context of Multiculturalism. The texts chosen in this paper clearly unfold their desire to fight back resulting in both individual and collective survival along with the possibility of political change

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