



Poiein and Infinite Identity: A Meta-critical Inquiry into Marginality

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Received: 21 Mar 2022; Received in revised form: 14 April 2022; Accepted: 24 April 2022; Available online: 30 April 2022
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Abstract— *The paper argues that the theoretical 'definitions' of marginality assume a fixed essence to the experience of marginality. And such definitions necessarily contradict the experience of marginality: the social experience as well as the experience performed in literature. The paper traces the evolution of different theories of marginality to locate the inherent contradictions caused by the mismatch between theory and experience. Following that, the paper explores the representations of marginality in S Hareesh's novel Meesha (Moustache (2018)) in the Malayalam language. The protagonist Vavachan belongs to a lower caste community and he often violates the caste equations and terrorises the social order with his uncanny appearance. This reading consequently shows that the literary experience of marginality does not 'fit' to a framework that theorises the 'marginal' as a finite category, and it necessitates a new framework to understand the 'marginal' as well as the dynamic relation between the margin and the centre. To accommodate the dynamic nature of the centre-margin relations, we need a formative critical framework that changes itself when it encounters a new possibility of centre-margin relations. The critical framework is perpetually formative in relation to new readings and experiences; such a framework transcends all predetermined models of centre-margin relations in a community. Jean-Luc Nancy adopts a similar approach in his work The Inoperative Community (1986). According to him, the predetermined conception of society as an 'essence' or constituted in an essence leads to the 'closure of the political'. Admitting the lack of an 'essence', the framework becomes open to differences and nuances of the experiences. The departure from 'essence' is also the departure from the theoretical fixities. In contextualising this idea in literary criticism, the primary inspiration of my paper is Stathis Gourgouris' conceptualisation that critical frameworks are in 'poiein' state. The framework is always in a perpetual reworking or 'in the making' state and never finite. By incorporating the 'infinite identity' of the community within a 'poiein' mode of criticism, my paper attempts to forge a new critical framework that understands the dynamic nature of the centre-margin relations.*

Keywords— *poiein, infinite identity, marginality, formative framework.*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to locate the concept of 'marginality' in the domain of literature and juxtapose the 'literary' approach to marginality with the theoretical approach towards the same. In the first part, the paper addresses these questions: what is marginality?, what constitutes the domain of literature?, what is the nature of

theoretical approaches to the idea of marginality?, what is the nature of marginality that is performed and experienced in literary works? Having discussed the elementary ideas, the second part of the paper focuses on the detailed comparison between the literary and theoretical approaches to marginality. This comparison demands and facilitates the creation of an inclusive and formative framework to locate the concept of marginality in literary

criticism as well as literary studies.

The critical theory defines marginality in multiple ways. Often the metaphor of space gets evoked in which case the definition of the margin is dependent on its relation with the centre. Also, the centre-margin relation is a relation of power and the margins or the entities in the margin are 'othered'. In the second edition of the book *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* authored by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, the definition of marginality is given as: "The perception and description of experience as 'marginal' is a consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethnocentrism, which imply that certain forms of experience are peripheral" (121). The existence of a specific type of power relation is fundamental to this kind of definition because the location of a specific entity is determined by the access that entity has to the power. That is to say that it is possible to identify if it/he/she is marginalised or not according to the "subject's access to power" (*Post-Colonial Studies* 121). This tendency to locate any relation(s) on a space of unbalanced power relations is general to all theories of marginalisation. However, various frameworks approach marginality differently based on how inclusive those frameworks are towards the possibility of change in power relations. For example, certain frameworks assume that the marginalised subjects have no access to the power and hence the centre is permanently in the possession of power. Whereas, certain frameworks admit the possibility of the subjects in the centre not always being at the centre of power relations. Likewise, the subjects in the periphery are not always incapable of accessing power. This possibility changes the permanency and unidirectionality of power relations: the marginalised can also potentially influence the 'marginaliser' and reverse the power structure at least in certain contexts.

To understand the change happening across different frameworks concerning marginality, this paper looks at the evolution of the term 'marginal'. Robert Park's essay "Human Migration and the Marginal Man" published in 1928 introduced the term 'marginal' to the critical discourses. Such takes on the term proposed that the experience of marginality is limited to those who live on the periphery of society. And hence the centre executes its power on the powerless others who are the migrants in this case. Later Marxian criticism and different schools of thought under its influence theorised the pivotal role of the economy in determining the power relations between the marginalised and the centre. However, sociologists such as Franco Ferrarotti had a more dynamic conceptualisation of power relations. He introduced the idea of 'social

marginality' in which it is possible for the subjects to "move from a proletariat to an under-proletariat condition" (Dennis 31). Here the subjects in the set of 'marginalised community' have relative freedom to move beyond the set and challenge the notion of a 'stagnant set of marginalised people'. By the 1980s, the idea of a dynamic set of marginalised communities gained prevalence in critical discourses.

In addition to this, another question emerged: is marginalisation always unidirectional? For example, is the coloniser always the executor of power and the colonized the receiver of it? Or is the coloniser capable of executing the power and dominating any instant of the power relations? Certain theories that still dominate the theoretical exercises of our time were evolved as an answer to this question. For example, Homi Bhabha's idea of 'mimicry' proposes that "colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits" (124 *Post Colonial Studies*). The act of 'mimicry' is a particular instance of the coloniser-colonised power relations. Unlike the common theorisations about a dominant and powerful coloniser, Bhabha theorises that "Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial

dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonized" (125 *Post Colonial Studies*). In this scenario, the coloniser is no longer the imposer of power and the direction of power relation is nuanced. Other contemporary theorists in the field including Franz Fanon and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak proposed theories that tend to admit the nuances in the experience of marginality. Generally, most of the contemporary frameworks of marginality agree that the nature and the constitution of the marginalised community are more nuanced. The same applies to the conceptual category of 'marginalisers' as well. Also, the power relation between the marginalised and the 'marginaliser' is dynamic and not unidirectional.

Having discussed the intricacies in categorising the marginality and the power relations involved in marginalisation, the paper tries to locate the concept in the broader context of experience and relations. An experience by definition transcends any theorisation. For example, the colonisation experienced by subject A is necessarily different from the colonisation experienced by subject B. Even if both A and B belong to the same country or community, the difference in their experiences is a necessary condition for them to be different subjects. Experience is singular whereas theory tends to generalise the experience. And hence the more theory gets exposed to

the singularity of experience the more it is forced to rearrange the framework to admit the nuances of experiences. Similarly, each relation is singular. The relation between A and B at a particular instance is unique. The literary theory makes exceptions to accommodate the singular, and at some point, it reaches the realisation that human experience is full of exceptions. And hence, in contrast to a theory that begins with generalities and tries to admit the singularity of experience at a later point, only a new framework that begins by accommodating the singularity of experience can properly address the nuances of marginality. Efforts to forge such a new framework can follow different methods. One of those methods can involve literature.

II. LITERATURE AND MARGINALITY

According to Derek Attridge, literature ‘comes into being’ as an event: “we can’t identify the work with any particular embodiment in a physical object.... The literary work comes into being only in the event of reading (2)”. For Attridge, a literary work is performed in a reader’s relation to the work. Before the relation, the work’ does not exist but the ‘text’ exists. A ‘text’ could be any linguistic entity. In the event of literature, the reader enters into a specific relation with the text and performs the text as a work of literature. So any story that the reader encounters in a literary work is singular to the specific event of reading. For example, when I read Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, the image of Bakha that I perform in my reading of the novel is singular to that specific reading. The image of the protagonist will be different for another reader. Also, the image of Bakha that I experience in my first reading of the novel will be different from Bakha’s image I experience in my second reading. Each reading is a different relation and the experience of untouchability performed in each reading is specific to that relation. Generally, literature starts with the singularity of each encounter with marginality whereas theory starts with the generalisation of the experience of marginality. Then the reader’s relation with a work of literature performs the nuances of marginal experience; the power relations are not unidirectional. The mode of literature is capable of accommodating the singularity of marginality. Also, the centre and periphery undergo perpetual change making it impossible to have permanent sets of the marginalised and the ‘marginaliser’. However, as theory begins with generalisations about the permanency of categories and fixity of power relations, each encounter with the complexity of marginal experiences contradicts its fundamental assumptions.

As an example to demonstrate how a work of

literature performs marginality differently, this paper considers a reading of the novel *Moustache* (2020) by S Hareesh. Since the novel is originally in Malayalam (*Meesa*), the paper considers the translation of the book by Jayasree Kalathil. The protagonist Vavachan belongs to the Pulaya community (a lower caste community in Kerala). In a drama, Vavachan gets a chance to enact the role of a police officer and his appearance with a big moustache terrifies the upper caste audience. The story evolves as Vavachan gets banished from the community because of his reluctance to shave the moustache. Now as an outcast, he dwells in swamps and deserted areas. The novel attains a mythic dimension because Vavachan’s moustache grows and covers the earth like a thicket. He becomes the nightmare of the upper-class community and the government orders to hunt him down. The story unfurls through strange but thought-provoking events as the government officials try to track Vavachan. The theoretical take on the story will locate Vavachan in the periphery and the upper-class authorities at the centre. But a reader can say that in his/her reading of the novel, Vavachan occupies the centre because s/he experienced the protagonist as the powerful and supernatural entity which executes his power to terrify and control the upper caste society. For example, the third chapter in which Vavachan meets the drama troop is titled “Ravanan”. The title evokes the role of Ravanan in the epic of *Ramayana*. In the ‘general’ reading, Ravanan occupies the periphery whereas Rama occupies the centre. However, contemporary readings and representations of *Ramayana* tend to break these fixed locations and even reverse the power relations. In this context, the title of the third chapter could be read as a reference to the same tendency to break fixities and conceptualise the categories of marginality as dynamic.

The author elevates the moustache to a mythic proportion which exposes the nuances of centre-margin relations. The moustache offers a significant threat to the authorities and it ‘empowers’ the character Vavachan to dismantle the power hierarchies. Towards the middle of the story, the power relations become so intricate that the label ‘marginal’ no longer suits Vavachan. This shift in power relations has to be understood in the context of the caste hierarchies that existed and still exist in Kuttanad; the landscape where the story evolves. In his author’s note, S Hareesh gives a detailed account of different castes in Kuttanad: “as in other parts of India, the division of society in castes based on rules of pollution and purity existed in Kerala.... At the time period covered in the story, the impact of caste on everyday life was felt even more acutely” (Hareesh 5). By birth, the protagonist is located in the lower strata of the society: “Vavachan-moustache is a Pulayan converted to Christianity.... Until the end of the

eighteenth century, upper-caste landowners treated Pulayans like property and exchanged them along with the land” (Hareesh 6). From this state of being an object of the transaction, the enormous moustache elevates Vavachan to mythic state with a divine status:

Tonight, I had an interesting story to tell my son, the story of a Moustache who could simultaneously appear in different places, and disappear at will. He had a magical moustache with curved ends that touched the sky, and a spotted eagle had built a nest in it. (Hareesh 47)

‘Moustache’ with a capital ‘M’ refers to the character of Vavachan. The transformation of the character from Vavachan to Moustache is comparable to the transformation of the mundane to the divine. The plot expands to an epic scale and the expansion radically alters the power structures. This movement through the power hierarchy, from being an object with no dignity to the status of a mighty epic hero, problematises the conventional theorisation of marginality.

But does the character of Moustache ‘reverse’ the power relations and the experience of marginality? Generally, does the reversal in the power structure inevitably lead to a reversal in the experience of marginality? The paper argues that the reversal in power structures does not necessarily result in the reversal of the experience of marginality. Instead, as it happens in the plot of the novel, the reversal of power hierarchies disturbs and dismantles our unidirectional conception of marginality. In the space of a novel, such a reversal forces the reader to attend to the nuances and multi-directionality of the experience of marginality. From the reading of *Moustache*, the paper argues that a framework of marginality should be inclusive of the dynamic nature of the experience of marginalisation. However, a theory from the perspective of subaltern studies can argue that any novel that portrays a marginalised caste or class inevitably comes with a dominant subaltern community that executes the power over others. This theorisation is another form of generalisation which limits the possibility of plural meanings and readings. Conclusively, this paper argues that the understanding of literature as an event with plural possibilities necessitates a new framework that is inclusive of the dynamic nature of marginality. In literature, the reader’s experience of marginality is singular. That is to say that the experience of marginality is a singular event performed in a particular relation between the reader and the text.

The paper derives inspiration from Sthathis Gourgouris’ idea of *Poiein* in the constitution of a formative framework to understand marginality. For

Gourgouris, *Poiein* is a practice of reading which is open to the plural possibilities and alterities of reading. *Poiein* could also be understood as a framework of reading that is open to the dynamic nature of the reading experience. Instead of imposing a defined and fixed theory over the experience of marginality, *Poiein* works as a framework that changes and ‘reforms’ as the experience of marginality are performed in the event of reading: “Its working is a perpetual reworking, a thorough reworking, which would not spare even itself as an object of that work” (Behdad 80). So the framework of reading always undergoes a ‘thorough reworking’ as the reader reads a new work. Such a framework can understand and accommodate the intricacies of marginality including the dynamics of power roles and hierarchies that we experienced in *Moustache*.

III. THE SOCIAL EXPERIENCE OF MARGINALITY

Will this framework of marginality in literature help other domains (such as the social and political domains) to modify and broaden their understanding of marginal experience? Are the political and social domains capable of including the dynamic and singular nature of marginality? Like *Poiein* that accommodates the nuances of marginal experiences in literature, is it possible to conceptualise a sociological framework that accommodates the dynamics of marginality? French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy’s book *La Communauté désœuvrée* (*The Inoperative Community* 1986) introduces a new way of conceptualising a community. For him, the ‘political’ is “is the place where community as such is brought into play. It is not, in any case, just the locus of power relations, to the extent that these relations set and upset the necessarily unstable and taut equilibrium of collectivity” (38). So the power relations are in a perpetual ‘reworking’ state and they ‘set and upset’ the equilibrium of collectivity. The dynamic power relations of the novel *Moustache* could be understood in the context of Nancy’s idea of the ‘political’.

Similarly, the real-life experience of marginality will gain a clearer comprehension with the help of this concept. Whereas imposing theory over society is assuming an essence for the society. For example, a postcolonial framework that universally assumes the subjugation of the ‘colonised’ citizen ‘essentially’ imposes that identity over each citizen. However, the experience of colonisation is different for each individual across the globe and the construction of a common colonial identity is almost impossible. The imposition of the ‘essence’ results in the closure of the ‘political’: “the thinking of

community as essence-is in effect the closure of the political” (Nancy 39). Nancy’s idea of community is rooted in the recognition of differences: “Such a thinking constitutes closure because it assigns to the community a common being, whereas community is a matter of something quite different...” (Nancy 39). The community should not be described in terms of an imagined ‘common being’. Instead, a clearer understanding of the community could be derived by admitting the ‘narcissistic’ lack of ‘substantial identity. Hence ‘infinite’ identity which is continually at ‘work’ creates the foundation for the concept of a formative community. On the contrary, theories, whether it be literary or sociological, start from the assumption of an imagined essence. The willingness to admit the lack of essence will inevitably lead to the conceptualisation of a framework that is open to differences. And in that case, the framework becomes formative as it accommodates the differences. Such a framework in the state of perpetual reworking could be established through the practice of ‘*Poiein*’.

In conclusion, the experience of marginality necessarily transcends the definitions and fixities proposed by theories. A clearer understanding of society and marginality necessitates a new framework that accommodates the dynamic nature of marginalised categories as well as the nuances of the marginal experience. A formative framework that admits the lack of an essence and a ‘substantial identity can be inclusive of the differences. The inclusion of differences and nuances of the experiences of marginality continuously ‘reforms’ the framework through the practice of *Poiein*.

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