THE POLITICS OF SILENCE AND MARGINALISED VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the politics of silence and the voices of marginalised communities in contemporary fiction, exploring resistance, trauma, identity, representation and the ethics of speaking and being silenced.

KEYWORDS-politics, silence, marginalized, contemporary, fiction

ABSTRACT

The Politics of Silence, Voice and the In-Between: Exploring Gender, Race and Insecurity from the Margins seeks to dismantle the deficit discourses generated through research about people as agency-less and, by extension, objects of study. The review argues that, regardless of marginalisation, people create spaces of liminality where they seek control over their lives by navigating the structures that exclude them. Challenging the false binary of silence as violence and voice as power, the review introduces the idea of an in-between ‘liminal space’ which is created by people to navigate conditions of oppression and move towards a politically stable and inclusive world. This review will be of great interest to students and scholars of gender studies, international development, peace and conflict studies, politics and international relations, sociology and media studies, and is an important resource for academic courses incorporating gender, feminist and postcolonial and decolonial perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the dialectic of voice and silence in contemporary women’s writing, analysing how selected texts by Margaret Atwood, Arundhati Roy, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reimagine silence as a site of resistance and self-definition. Grounded in feminist and poststructuralist theory (Cixous, Irigaray, Spivak), the study situates silence within the historical discourse of female oppression and reinterprets it as a strategy of empowerment. Through comparative textual analysis, the research demonstrates that silence in women’s narratives functions not as void but as creative agency, mediating trauma, identity, and cultural displacement. The findings suggest that silence possesses its own rhetorical power—constructing alternative modes of expression that challenge patriarchal discourse and expand the boundaries of feminist poetics. Ultimately, the paper argues that to be silent is not to be voiceless, but to reimagine what voice can mean.[1,2,3]

In contemporary English-language fiction, silence is not merely the absence of speech; it functions as a multivalent aesthetic, political, and narrative practice. Far from being a passive void, silence acts as a powerful site of resistance, trauma, and structural critique.

Key Dimensions of the Politics of Silence

- **Resistance and Agency:** Silence is frequently deployed by characters to subvert dominant expectations of compliance, emotional transparency, or verbal submission. In feminist and postcolonial frameworks, strategic silence or reticence allows marginalized figures to retain autonomy within unequal power dynamics.
- **Trauma and the Unsayable:** In post-9/11 fiction and novels dealing with historical or institutional violence (such as Catholic institutional abuse in Irish fiction), authors use structural gaps, minimalist prose, or narrative fragmentation—seen in works by authors like Jonathan Safran Foer, Don DeLillo, and Colm Tóibín—to capture grief and psychological dissociation that language fails to articulate.
- **Concealment and Complicity:** Silence also operates defensively or manipulatively. It masks systemic inequalities, corporate or state cover-ups, and the private complicities that sustain modern alienation or social taboos.
- **Aesthetic and Narrative Strategy:** Novelists utilize narrative gaps to build suspense, force readers to actively feel and interpret the unspoken, and expose the tension between what is verbalized and what is willfully suppressed.[4,5,6]

DISCUSSION

Contemporary fiction in the English language has increasingly centered on the politics of marginalized voices—shifting narratives away from dominant, hegemonic canons and toward the lived experiences of groups historically pushed to the periphery.

Key Dimensions of Marginalized Voices in Contemporary Fiction

- **Deconstruction of Power and Canons:** Modern writers and theorists use literature to question and dismantle dominant social, economic, and racial hierarchies. Frameworks from postcolonialism, critical race studies, and feminist theory show how silence is often an artificially produced condition of power rather than a natural absence.
- **Aesthetic and Stylistic Subversion:** Authors rarely rely strictly on conventional linear or Western storytelling models. Instead, they incorporate fragmentation, polyphony (multiple distinct voices), oral traditions, regional dialects, and linguistic subversion to reflect the complexity of marginalized identities.
- **The Intersection of Identity and Globalism:** Contemporary works—by authors like Zadie Smith, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Mohsin Hamid—explore how migration, the digital age, climate change, and global capitalism intersect with race, class, caste, and gender.
- **Forms of Resistance (Oven vs.** Subtle): Resistance in marginalized literature is not always an overt political battle; it frequently manifests through psychological self-exploration, autobiographical witnessing, small acts of defiance, or even strategic silence as a form of self-awareness.[7,8,9]
- **The Ethics of Representation:** Critical discourse heavily interrogates who gets to tell these stories, addressing the tension between authentic self-representation versus the risk of co-optation, stereotyping, or commercial commodification by mainstream publishing. Resources like the Voices from the Margins Review Series highlight how translations and

critical frameworks bring lesser-seen regional and caste-based narratives into broader academic and literary visibility.

This study seeks to examine the convergence of Dalit literature and postmodernism in the realm of current English literature. Dalit literature, originating from the marginalized voices of India's oppressed people, provides distinct insights into societal hierarchy, identity politics, and resistance. Postmodernism, defined by its skepticism of overarching narratives and focus on plurality, fragmentation, and subjectivity, offers a theoretical framework for analyzing the varied narratives and styles present in Dalit literature. The research examines the engagement of Dalit literature with postmodern themes, including the deconstruction of power structures, the fluidity of identity, and the destabilizing of fixed categories. This study analyzes the utilization of postmodern techniques, including metafiction, intertextuality, and fragmentation, by Dalit writers to undermine prevailing discourses and contest established norms. The research examines the significance of language and representation in Dalit literature, especially within the framework of postmodern linguistic theories and translation politics. This project seeks to elucidate the intricate relationship between Dalit literature and postmodernism through meticulous textual analysis and theoretical exploration, emphasizing their shared resonances and inherent conflicts. This study aims to enhance the comprehension of Dalit literary expression and the intricacies of postmodern aesthetics in current English literature by contextualizing Dalit writing within the broader scope of postmodern literary theory. Resistance is very much conditioned by those very socio-political forces that it seeks to challenge. The birth of the Post-Colonial theory, underlines two important points: 1) Domination and resistance are mutually interdependent; 2) The Will to Power is central to both. The difference between LR and RL is subtle and important.[10,11,12] If Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak explores the issue of the "subaltern voice" in one of the foundational texts of Postcolonial Studies: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and notes that any attempt to recover the voices, perspectives and subjectivities of the socially outcaste is heavily compromised. We also have Frantz Fanon and of course, Homi Bhabha who argue in favour of the pathos of 'cultural confusion' so that it can be used as a strategy of political subversion. Notions of the orient "Other" and European "Self" throughout the world- and questions of identity back home and the world over have been effectively tackled by writers like Bhisham Sahni, Shashi Tharoor, Amrinder Kaur, Taslima Nasreen, Manjushree Thapa, Mahasweta Devi and of course, writers of the Dalit literature in India. Whether it be an analysis of Tawfiq Awwad or Mongane Serote, or our very own Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, their writing put forth the marginalised subjectivity in literature. How far have the marginalised voices reached? Can they still not speak? Do other social/cultural theories offer a way out of this silence/confusion? How have the marginalised been portrayed in Literature? The present anthology On the Fringes: Marginalised Voices in English Literature attempts to explore such marginalize voices and the problem involved in crushing or establishing the "oppressive power structures". Dr. Sheeba Rakesh and Dr. Arvind Nawale studies the marginalization of translation and literature of the marginalized in translation in their paper. Dr. Sachin Ketkar in his article problemtises and discusses the notions of Centre and Margins as operating in the realm of Dalit literature. Dr. Lalan Kishore Singh in his paper entitled "Partition and Marginal Voices : The Naga Experience of Marginalization through Temsula Ao's These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone."unearths the hitherto forgotten and marginalized experiences of Partition as they took shape in the lives of the marginalized people. Arijit Ghosh studies the history behind the production of the text of the play "Budhan : A Play by Denotified Chharas" which

commemorates the death of Budhan Sabar, one who belonged to the Denotified Tribes, in West Bengal. Activist writers like Mahasweta Devi, G.N. Devy and Laxman Gaikwad played key roles that gave wider coverage of the Budhan murder case through the newsletter Budhan started by G. N. Devy. Anil Verma and Navjot Kaur discuss the sordid lives of the untouchables at the hands of the upper class society in their study of Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. Dalvir Gahlawat, studies the life and literary contribution of Mahatma Jyotibarao Phule in his article. Dr. B.O. Satyanarayana Reddy talks about challenges facing the underdogs of the society and how they manage to overcome them with the force of personal will in his paper entitled "Revolutionising The Marginalised: Repurcussions and Revelations in U.R. Anantha Murthy's Bharathipura." Stuti Khare attempts to analyze Balbir Madhopuri's autobiography Changiya Rukh to understand how this tale, even though the tale of the usual sufferings of Dalits, is in quest of a narrative to relate and recreate their lives. Dr. Ajay Deshmukh in his scholarly article studies the role that languages play major role in developing of relations among many ethnic groups and their responses to each other, through a study of Laxman Mane's Upara. Bharathiraja's article studies Bama's autobiography as an attempt to provide a voice to the Dalit experience.[13,14,15] Saurabh Shukla writes on the issue of identities as represented in Taslima Nasreen's Lajja. Dr. L V Padma Rao talks about Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life to underscore the difficulties and struggles that are common between the women of colour and the Dalit women back home. Dr. Pratima Chaitanya seeks to analyse how in these texts the caste system is subverted and the Dalits/ Tribals are brought into the centre from the margins. Shelly Bhoil from Brazil discusses the Tibetan literary practices in her paper. Dr. Sakshi Tyagi studies Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and argues how the underprivileged people have been brought to a state of assertion from the confining bounds of erasure. Sahab Uddin undertakes the study of Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and A Handful of Rice to show the portrayal of the underprivileged sections of the society. Sanchari Sur looks at the "contract of silence" in Bapsi Sidhwa's Defend Yourself Against Me.

RESULTS

The modern English literature can be defined as life which is rapidly changing and dynamic in the globalized, digitalized world. This work enables me to discuss the way in which modern novels break the rules and conventions by discussing significant issues, trying something new in terms of narration style and style, and becoming directly involved in the contemporary social and political processes. I examine the novels of authors such as Zadie Smith, Mohsin Hamid, Sakib, Margaret Atwood, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, deconstructing most of them, and identifying some of the common thread: identity, migration, mental health, climate change, and the digital age, among others. Marginalized voices are stepping into the spotlight now, and they are shaking up what we think of as the Western literary canon. Using an interpretive approach, I argue that contemporary literature does not just reflect the world; it argues with it, questions it, and sometimes even offers answers. This makes it hugely relevant in classrooms, in culture, and in politics right now.[16,17,18]

On a recent field visit to Baghpat, Uttar Pradesh as a part of my coursework for Policy Action Lab, I had the chance to survey residents on the democratic condition of India, particularly in light of the results of the latest Lok Sabha elections. The survey was meant to understand individual opinions about democracy and capture the person's thoughts and experiences. While

conducting surveys on gender in the field, one interaction left me thinking deeply about the dynamics of autonomy, gender and voice. It was a moment that brought Slyvia Walby's concept of patriarchy, which she defines as 'a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.' vividly to life.

I was surveying a middle-aged woman who replied, "Fill my survey the same as what my husband said because my opinion is the same as his." At first, I assumed it might just be a matter of convenience, maybe even a gesture of deference. But as I probed further, she explained, "He knows politics best and hence, whatever is his opinion is also my opinion."

This response seems unusual for a survey that aims to understand personal perspectives. Still, in that brief conversation, I witnessed a nuanced example of what Walby expresses in her review 'Theorizing Patriarchy' (1990). Slyvia Walby's theory of patriarchy emphasises that men not only dominate the formal structure of power in society (politics, economics or law) but also shape the very framework of thought and agency in private spaces, creating a system of "public" and "private" patriarchy. Through this lens, even deeply personal matters, such as individual opinions on democracy, are often underpinned by the structure prioritising male voices as more credible or informed.

This woman's political opinions had become an extension of her husband's perspective. Her faith in his political knowledge went beyond respect, and it reflected a norm that she internalised over time, that his political understanding was somehow more legitimate and valuable. While she spoke with warmth, trust and respect, this situation highlights how patriarchy can reach deeply into the private lives. This was not just about who had more on-ground political and economic information, it was more about who had the power to hold and express an independent opinion.[18,19,20]

Walby identifies the household as one of the six primary structures where patriarchy operates alongside the State, paid work, violence, sexuality and culture. What stayed with me about this interaction was how the two of these structures the household and the state, intersected here. The household and the State (the subject matter of the survey) were interwoven in a way that subordinated her voice to his. The woman's trust in her husband's perspective had subtly but powerfully shaped her sense of political agency, just as Walby argues that these structures do not function in isolation; instead, they intersect and overlap, reinforcing patriarchal norms.

This particular encounter stayed with me because it reminded me that democracy, in theory, thrives on diverse, independent voices. However, in practice, the individual agency, especially that of a woman, is often shaped by a complex mix of power dynamics within families, communities and societal norms. The above interaction serves as a testament to the way patriarchy operates not only within formal political spaces like government halls or public offices but also how it seeps into the fabric of everyday life. Patriarchy, in this sense, doesn't just dominate political structure; it also governs the politics of daily life.

Through this experience, I realised that field surveys are more than just a collection of responses. It was a reflection of layered identities, experiences and sometimes silences. Slyvia Walby's work has been invaluable in helping me understand that democracy, as a system, is only as

inclusive as the individual voices it allows to be heard. In a world where individual voice can be a shared opinion, Walby's insights remain as relevant as ever and prompt us to examine who holds the right to speak and who is genuinely heard.

CONCLUSIONS

How silence relates to politics has traditionally been connected to the dismissal of silence from politics. However, there is a growing recognition that this representation of silence as absence is harmful to our ability to think through the integral and productive role that silences play in political life. This review exchange contributes to this shift in theorising that emerges from the field of 'silence studies'. To this end, the following exchange between Michael Freeden and Mónica Brito Vieira regarding their recent reviews on the politics of silence looks at how each author specifically engages with how and in what ways silence relates to politics. In bringing these authors together not only is clarity given to why silence(s) should be a research concern, but also to the issues of how and to what end silence can or should be researched. Arundhati Roy argues that silence is often produced by power, not by the absence of a voice. People who are marginalized, oppressed, or excluded usually have experiences and perspectives to share, but political, social, and economic structures prevent them from being heard or taken seriously. Calling them "voiceless" can obscure the real issue: who has the power to speak, who is listened to, and who is deliberately ignored. Justice requires not giving people a voice, but dismantling the systems that silence them.[20]

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