

Reframing the Margins: Gender, Sexuality, and Queerness in Select Odia Fiction

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Abstract

This research investigates the complex dynamics of marginality in contemporary Odia literature, specifically examining how gender and sexuality marginalities manifest, resist, and transform within literary discourse. Marginality, as the central theoretical framework of this study, transcends conventional notions of exclusion to encompass the contested spaces where normative gender and sexual identities are challenged, subverted, and reimagined through fictional narratives. Marginality in gender and sexuality operates as both a condition of social exclusion and a site of creative resistance within these literary works. This research re-defines marginality not as static disadvantage, but as fluid, dynamic territories where queer identities negotiate between visibility and invisibility, acceptance and rejection. The margins become generative spaces where alternative narratives of identity, desire, and belonging emerge to challenge heteronormative and cisgender frameworks that dominate mainstream Odia society.

Contemporary Odia literature's engagement with gender marginalities represents a revolutionary departure from traditional literary paradigms. This study examines how marginality functions through three ground-breaking primary texts that have fundamentally altered the landscape of regional queer representation. Sarojini Sahoo's pioneering short story *Nepathya* (1998), arguably the first Odia queer fiction, establishes foundational explorations of sexual marginality. Her novel *Asamajik* (2011) chronicles the true story of China Mali and Phula Mani, a tribal lesbian couple from Koraput district, demonstrating how marginalized subjects transcend heteronormative expectations when Phula abandons her arranged marriage to unite with China, challenging both patriarchal structures and compulsory heterosexuality. Gender marginality expands through *Kinnara* (2023), edited by Hiranmayee Mishra, presenting twelve diverse stories centering transgender experiences and addressing the literary vacuum surrounding gender non-conforming identities in Odia literature. These narratives illuminate specific forms of transgender marginality while creating discursive space within mainstream literary discourse. Subhransu Panda's *Itara* (2021) offers intimate portrayal of Gobinda's journey through multiple gender identities - Baba, Tila, Gopi, Leena, and Kareena highlighting complex negotiations between authentic self-expression and societal conformity pressures that characterize gender marginality.

The margins in these texts function simultaneously as spaces of oppression and empowerment, where marginalized identities articulate experiences previously rendered invisible in Odia literature. This research reveals how marginality operates as a productive force, transforming traditional narrative structures to accommodate untold stories of gender and sexual diversity. These works collectively demonstrate how queer fiction functions as both mirror and catalyst for social transformation, creating sites where marginalized voices can be articulated, understood, and validated within contemporary Odia cultural frameworks. This study ultimately argues that marginality in Odia queer literature represents not periphery but generative centre from which new forms of literary expression emerge. Through analysis of these select Odia fiction, this research demonstrates how exploration of gender and sexual margins has fundamentally expanded Odia literary possibilities, creating lasting contributions to regional literature and broader conversations about identity, belonging, and transformative storytelling power.

Keywords: Marginality, Gender and Sexuality Marginalities, Odia Queer Literature, LGBTQIA+ Literary Representation, Contemporary Regional Fiction

Objective

The primary objective of this research is to investigate and analyse the complex dynamics of marginality in contemporary Odia literature, with a specific focus on how gender and sexuality marginalities are represented, challenged, and transformed within literary discourse.

My research aims to redefine marginality not as a static condition of disadvantage, but as dynamic, fluid territories where queer identities negotiate complex relationships between visibility and invisibility, acceptance and rejection. The study seeks to demonstrate how these margins function as generative spaces where alternative narratives of identity, desire, and belonging emerge to challenge the heteronormative and cisgender frameworks that dominate mainstream Odia society and culture.

More specifically, the objective is to prove that marginality in Odia queer literature represents not the periphery, but rather a generative centre from which new forms of literary expression emerge. The researcher wants to show how exploration of gender and sexual margins has fundamentally expanded Odia literary possibilities, creating lasting contributions to both regional literature and broader conversations about identity and belonging.

Statement About the Problem

The problem this research addresses is the historical absence and inadequate representation of gender and sexuality marginalities in Odia literature, along with the lack of scholarly examination of how these marginalities function within regional literary discourse.

My argument is based upon the fact that the traditional Odia literature has operated within heteronormative and cisgender frameworks, leaving queer identities and experiences largely invisible or misrepresented. There has been a literary vacuum surrounding gender non-conforming identities in Odia literature, with marginalized voices being systematically excluded from mainstream literary discourse.

The problem extends beyond mere representation to encompass how marginality itself has been conceptualized. My research challenges conventional notions that treat marginality as simple exclusion, arguing instead that this approach fails to recognize the complex, productive ways that marginalized identities operate within literary spaces. This study addresses how queer fiction in Odia literature has been understudied as both a mirror for social realities and a catalyst for social transformation.

Methodology

The research employs a literary analysis methodology focusing on close reading and textual analysis of specific primary sources. The data collection centres on some ground-breaking primary texts that represent different aspects of gender and sexuality marginalities in contemporary Odia literature.

The research appears to employ qualitative literary analysis methods, examining how these texts function as sites where marginalized voices can be articulated, understood, and validated within contemporary Odia cultural frameworks. The methodology involves

analysing narrative structures, character development, and thematic content to understand how marginality operates as both oppression and empowerment.

I would use theoretical frameworks from queer theory, gender studies and postcolonial literary criticism to analyse how these texts challenge traditional paradigms and create new discursive spaces. The study examines specific literary techniques and narrative strategies employed by these authors to represent complex negotiations between authentic self-expression and societal conformity pressures.

This comprehensive approach would allow the paper to demonstrate how these select works of Odia fiction collectively illustrate the transformative power of exploring gender and sexual margins in regional literature, contributing to both local literary traditions and broader academic discourses about marginality, identity and representation.

OR

This research adopts a rigorous feminist and queer literary criticism methodology, positioning gender and queer theory as the primary analytical lenses through which marginality is examined, interrogated, and theorized within contemporary Odia literature. The study employs systematic close reading and critical textual analysis of strategically selected primary sources, grounded in Butler's theory of gender performativity, Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet, and Muñoz's concept of disidentification to illuminate how marginalized gender and sexual identities negotiate visibility, agency, and resistance within regional literary discourse.

The methodology is anchored in intersectional queer feminist theory, synthesizing Butler's performativity framework with Crenshaw's intersectionality paradigm and Halberstam's queer failure theory to examine how gender and sexual marginality operates as a complex matrix of oppression, subversion, and empowerment. The research employs postcolonial queer theory, particularly drawing from Gopinath's concept of "impossible desires" and Puar's assemblage theory, to analyze how regional Odia contexts produce specific configurations of marginalized subjectivities that resist both heteronormative and homonormative paradigms.

This epistemological approach recognizes marginality not as a static condition but as a dynamic process of negotiation, where gender and sexual non-conforming subjects engage in what Muñoz terms "disidentificatory performances" - strategic appropriations and transformations of dominant cultural narratives to create spaces for non-normative existence.