



VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: SILENCE AND SUPPRESSION IN THE GREEN MILE AND THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

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ABSTRACT

Literature has long served as a powerful medium for articulating the experiences of marginalized individuals whose voices are silenced by dominant social, political, and institutional structures. Stephen King's *The Green Mile* (1996) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), though emerging from distinct cultural and literary traditions, converge in their representation of marginalised identities subjected to systemic oppression and enforced silence. This research article undertakes a comparative study of the two novels to examine how silence operates as a political tool that sustains injustice, racial discrimination, class hierarchy, and postcolonial alienation. Through the lenses of Subaltern Studies, Critical Race Theory, and postcolonial criticism, the paper analyses the narratives of John Coffey, immigrants, servants, and ethnic minorities who inhabit spaces of exclusion. The study argues that both novels challenge hegemonic power structures by foregrounding suppressed voices and exposing the moral failures of institutional authority. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that silence in these texts is not merely an absence of speech but a constructed condition that reveals the deep fractures within modern societies and questions the ethics of power, justice, and humanity.

KEYWORDS: Marginalisation, Silence, Subaltern Voices, Power and Injustice, Comparative Literature.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of marginalisation occupies a central position in contemporary literary studies, particularly in works that interrogate power relations, social hierarchies, and institutional authority. Marginalised individuals which is defined by race, class, ethnicity, nationality, or legal status, often exist at the periphery of social visibility, denied voice and agency by dominant systems. Literature not only reflects these silences but also disrupts them by offering narrative space to the oppressed. Stephen King's *The Green Mile* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* exemplify this literary intervention by dramatizing the lived experiences of those relegated to the margins.

Although the two novels differ significantly in context and genre i.e. *The Green Mile* being a prison narrative set in Depression-era America and *The Inheritance of Loss* a postcolonial novel spanning India and the United States. They share a profound concern with silenced voices and structural oppression. King exposes the racial injustice embedded in the American penal system, while Desai critiques the enduring legacies of colonialism, class disparity, and immigrant alienation. Both authors reveal how institutional frameworks produce silence, whether through incarceration, execution, poverty, or cultural displacement.

This article explores how silence and suppression function as political mechanisms in these novels. It argues that silence is not passive but actively imposed by systems of power to maintain social order. By foregrounding marginalised voices, King and Desai challenge readers to confront the ethical implications of injustice and question the moral legitimacy of authority.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SILENCE, POWER, AND THE MARGINS

The study of silence in literature has evolved as a critical tool for understanding power dynamics and exclusion. Michel Foucault's analysis of discourse highlights how power determines not only what can be spoken but also who is permitted to speak. Silence, in this sense, becomes an extension of power rather than its absence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the subaltern speak?", further complicates this idea by suggesting that marginalised voices are often mediated, distorted, or erased by dominant narratives.

In *The Green Mile*, silence manifests through legal authority and racial ideology. John Coffey, a Black man with supernatural healing abilities, is condemned by a system that refuses to hear his innocence. His silence is enforced by institutional power and racial prejudice. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, silence emerges through class hierarchy, colonial residue, and global inequality. Characters such as Biju, the cook, and the Nepali insurgents occupy liminal spaces where their voices lack political legitimacy.

Subaltern Studies and postcolonial criticism provide useful frameworks for analysing these narratives. They reveal how power operates through exclusion and how literature can recover suppressed histories and identities. By placing these novels in dialogue, the article highlights the universality of marginalisation while acknowledging its culturally specific manifestations.

MARGINALISATION IN THE GREEN MILE: RACE, INCARCERATION, AND SILENCE

Stephen King's *The Green Mile* is set in Cold Mountain Penitentiary during the 1930s, a period marked by racial segregation and economic depression. The novel centres on death row inmates and prison guards, exposing the moral contradictions of capital punishment. Among the prisoners, John Coffey stands out as the most profoundly marginalised figure.

John Coffey is a Black man accused of raping and murdering two white girls, a charge that reflects historical patterns of racial scapegoating in America. Despite his gentle nature and miraculous healing powers, Coffey is condemned to death, illustrating how racial identity overrides truth within the justice system. His silence is both literal and symbolic: he speaks little, lacks legal representation, and is denied a platform to assert his innocence.

King uses Coffey's character to critique the institutional silencing of Black voices. Coffey's supernatural abilities highlight the moral blindness of the system that executes him. His acceptance of death further underscores the internalization of oppression, where the marginalised come to view suffering as inevitable. The prison itself functions as a metaphor for social exclusion. The guards, though sympathetic, are complicit in enforcing an unjust system. Their inability to save Coffey reveals the limitations of individual morality within oppressive institutions. Silence, in this context, becomes a collective failure which can be either a refusal or inability to challenge authority.

POWER, RACE, AND THE ETHICS OF EXECUTION IN THE GREEN MILE

Capital punishment in *The Green Mile* serves as the ultimate form of silencing. Execution eradicates not only life but also testimony, memory, and resistance. The novel raises ethical questions about the legitimacy of state-sanctioned violence and the racial biases embedded within it. The character of Percy Wetmore embodies institutional cruelty and unchecked power. His abuse of prisoners demonstrates how systems attract individuals who exploit authority to dominate the vulnerable. Percy's actions silence inmates through fear and humiliation, reinforcing hierarchical control. Paul Edgecombe, the narrator, represents moral ambivalence. While compassionate, he remains bound by duty. His silence reflects the ethical paralysis that allows injustice to persist. King suggests that silence in the face of injustice is itself a form of complicity.

Through these characters, *The Green Mile* exposes how racialized bodies are rendered disposable within legal frameworks. Coffey's death becomes a haunting reminder of the human cost of silence.

MARGINALISATION IN THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS: CLASS, COLONIALISM, AND DISPLACEMENT

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores marginalisation through the lens of postcolonial India and immigrant America. Set primarily in Kalimpong during the Gorkha insurgency, the novel depicts characters trapped between histories, cultures, and economic realities. The cook, an unnamed servant, epitomises class-based silence. His identity is defined solely by service, rendering him invisible within the household. His emotional world is suppressed, and his aspirations are mediated through his son, Biju. The cook's silence reflects the broader erasure of working-class voices in postcolonial societies.

Biju's experience as an undocumented immigrant in the United States reveals another dimension of marginalisation. He occupies hidden spaces like basements, kitchens, and back rooms—symbolising his social invisibility. His silence is enforced by fear of deportation and economic exploitation. Despite the myth of the American Dream, Biju's reality is one of alienation and loss. Desai uses fragmented narratives and shifting perspectives to mirror the instability of marginalised identities. Silence becomes a survival strategy, allowing characters to endure oppressive conditions without resistance.

ETHNIC MARGINALISATION AND POLITICAL SILENCING

The Gorkha insurgency in *The Inheritance of Loss* highlights the political dimensions of silence. Nepali-speaking minorities demand recognition and autonomy, yet their voices are delegitimised by the state. Violence emerges as a response to prolonged suppression, suggesting that silence breeds extremism.

Characters like Gyan reflect internalised colonial attitudes that perpetuate marginalisation. His ambivalence toward the insurgency illustrates how ideological confusion silences ethical clarity. Desai critiques both state oppression and revolutionary violence, emphasizing the tragic consequences of political silencing. The judge, Jemubhai Patel, represents colonial alienation. His self-imposed silence and emotional withdrawal stem from internalised racism acquired during his education in England. His identity fracture underscores the psychological toll of colonial marginalisation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: SILENCE AS A POLITICAL MECHANISM

Silence emerges as an active political mechanism rather than a passive absence of speech. Both Stephen King and Kiran Desai depict silence as a product of institutional power that functions to maintain social control and legitimize injustice. Through different socio-political contexts, the novels reveal how authority regulates

whose voices are heard and whose are erased. Despite differing contexts, *The Green Mile* and *The Inheritance of Loss* converge in their depiction of silence as an instrument of power. In both novels, institutions like prisons, courts, colonial states, and economic systems like regulate speech and agency.

In *The Green Mile*, silence is enforced through the legal and penal systems. John Coffey's inability to challenge his wrongful conviction illustrates how racial prejudice intersects with judicial authority to suppress truth. The prison system denies him agency, rendering him voiceless in a process that prioritizes procedure over justice. His execution represents the ultimate political silencing, where the state permanently eliminates dissenting testimony. Even sympathetic figures remain silent, exposing how obedience to authority sustains systemic violence.

Similarly, in *The Inheritance of Loss*, silence operates through class hierarchy, postcolonial governance, and global capitalism. Marginal figures such as the cook and undocumented immigrants like Biju are excluded from political discourse and social recognition. Their silence is institutionalized through economic dependency and fear of displacement. Additionally, the suppression of ethnic voices during the Gorkha insurgency demonstrates how the state delegitimizes minority demands by denying them narrative space.

John Coffey's racial silence parallels Biju's immigrant invisibility. Both characters exist within systems that deny their humanity while exploiting their labour or bodies. Their suffering exposes the moral bankruptcy of structures that prioritise order over justice. The novels also highlight the limitations of empathy within oppressive systems. Guards in *The Green Mile* and elites in *The Inheritance of Loss* may feel compassion, but rarely act decisively. Silence persists through inaction as much as through coercion.

By juxtaposing American racial injustice with postcolonial marginalisation, the texts reveal the global nature of suppression. Silence transcends national boundaries, emerging wherever power consolidates itself through exclusion. Comparatively, both novels reveal that silence is not accidental but strategically produced to preserve dominant power structures. By exposing these mechanisms, King and Desai critique the moral failure of institutions that equate silence with order. Ultimately, their narratives challenge readers to recognize silence as a form of political violence that demands ethical resistance.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND THE RECOVERY OF VOICE

Both authors employ narrative strategies that resist silencing. Both Stephen King and Kiran Desai employ distinct yet effective storytelling techniques to counteract the enforced muteness imposed by oppressive social and institutional systems. Through narrative mediation, the authors transform silence into testimony, allowing marginalised figures to attain symbolic voice

In *The Green Mile*, King adopts a retrospective first-person narration through Paul Edgecombe, whose recollection of events serves as a moral confession. John Coffey, though largely voiceless within the prison system, is resurrected through Paul's memory. This mediated narration highlights the ethical burden of witnessing injustice and underscores how remembrance itself becomes an act of resistance. Coffey's story survives not through institutional records but through empathetic narration, challenging the authority of legal discourse. Further, Paul Edgecombe's confession serves as an act of belated resistance against institutional silence.

Conversely, *The Inheritance of Loss* employs a fragmented, polyphonic narrative structure that mirrors the fractured identities of its characters. Desai shifts perspectives between elite and marginal figures, disrupting hierarchical storytelling. Characters like Biju and the cook gain narrative presence despite their social invisibility. Their interior monologues and lived experiences contest dominant postcolonial narratives that traditionally privilege elite voices. Desai specifically allows marginal voices to coexist with dominant ones, challenging hierarchical storytelling. By focusing on peripheral characters, Desai decentralises authority and reclaims narrative space for the silenced.

Both novels demonstrate that voice recovery in literature does not always require direct speech. Instead, narrative framing, memory, and multiplicity of perspectives become mechanisms through which silence is exposed and resisted. By foregrounding marginalised experiences, King and Desai assert literature's ethical responsibility to bear witness. Ultimately, their narrative strategies convert silence from a condition of oppression into a space of critical engagement, reaffirming storytelling as a powerful means of reclaiming human dignity.

CONCLUSION

Voices from the Margins: Silence and Suppression in The Green Mile and The Inheritance of Loss reveals how literature interrogates the politics of exclusion and power. Stephen King and Kiran Desai, writing from distinct cultural positions, converge in their critique of systems that marginalise individuals and suppress dissent.

Silence in these novels is not merely absence but an imposed condition shaped by race, class, colonial history, and institutional authority. By foregrounding marginalised identities, both texts expose the ethical failures of modern societies and challenge readers to confront uncomfortable truths. Ultimately, these novels affirm literature's role as a moral and political force. By giving voice to the silenced, they resist erasure and demand accountability. In doing so, they remind us that listening to the margins is essential for justice, empathy, and human dignity.

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