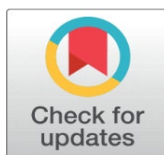


TRANGRESSING AFFECTIVE INTERSECTIONS AND FLUID IDENTITIES: A LIMINAL STUDY OF LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD

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ABSTRACT

Women's Narratives from the Eastern Himalaya, when analysed critically, portray that there is a constant spatial transition of identity, and belongingness. Social structures normally undergo transformations, which are usually short term, but can make human beings willingly give up their previous identities and eventually acquire homogenised states which are new, ready-made, and normal. This paper attempts to analyse women characters who come across daily instances of liminal fluidity which manipulates affectivity in spite of fluid conjunctures. The paper also analyses how there is reconciliation between spaces and identities, in the select narratives from the anthology of stories, *Laburnum for my Head*, by Temsula Ao.

Keywords: Manipulation of Affectivity, Fluid Conjunctures, Hypothesis of Continuity, Liminal Fluidity

1. INTRODUCTION

Liminality is an anthropological term propounded by Arnold Van Gennep, a French ethnographer, in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*. The term has been widely used in several areas of Humanities and Social Sciences, to comprehend transgression and transformation of an individual in the globalizing world. Van Gennep put across the idea that rites of passage in a community, and especially that of an individual, crosses three phases, namely, Pre-liminal, Liminal and Post-liminal, or in other words, rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation (Vizedom and Caffee 5). Gennep used this concept to understand the tribal and religious rites of passage whereas Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist, broadened the concept by applying it in almost all contexts of day-to-day life (Betwixt and Between). Derived etymologically from the Latin 'limen' meaning threshold, liminality can be defined as "the transitional period or phase of a rite of passage during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc." (Turner 67). Liminal individuals are those who are "betwixt and between", or in more literal terms "neither here nor there", as they move between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony. Turner mentions the concept of the 'crossing-over' space in

liminality, which is a space where an individual has left something behind, but has not fully entered something else. This particular idea has the potential to develop into a paradigm that can help humanity understand the complexity of social order and structure, individual agency and identity, and cultural transmission and overcome the precariousness that humanity withholds.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sanjoy Hazarika and Reshmi Banerjee, have edited an exhaustive volume on the Eastern Himalayas, in which they summarise that a comprehension of the Northeastern identity is not only essentialized, but also fictionalized, through a continuous process of construction and reconstruction; and this is done in a manner that is far removed from the reality of everyday existence (Hazarika and Banerjee 195). The women involved in the narratives selected for this paper; both fictional and non-fictional, are in one way or the other affected by the rites and rituals, which are common to the region when it comes to customary rites of passage from birth to death. Ritual, according to Turner is “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings as power” (Turner 90). These ritual codes and customs have the power of defining the roles of both men and women in these Himalayan communities which are usually close knit, due to the geography of the region.

3. DISCUSSION

Agnes Horvarth, mentions how Michael Dorby uses the terms ‘manipulation of affectivity’, ‘fluid conjunctures’ and ‘hypothesis of continuity’ to explain liminal fluidity’ which has been described by Turner as a sudden challenge, crisis or opportunity in the context of everyday life. ‘Manipulation of affectivity’ refers to the unforced liminal moments in day to life which make human beings give up their previous identities and acquire new readymade homogenised forms. ‘Fluid conjunctures’ are social structures that undergo short-term transformations of their state and can experience different transient states. ‘Hypothesis of continuity’ is a concept which says that in spite of the transformation, things look normal or are normalised (Horvarth et al. 64).

In Tamsula Ao’s *Three Women*, from the anthology *Laburnum for my Head*, the narrative runs across the secrets in the lives of Martha, Medemla and Lipoktula. “The three of them just stood there for quite some time; a strange trio, as though enacting a ritualistic affirmation of the power of mother-love to mesh the insecurity of innocence in the magic of an emotionally enlarged truth” (Ao 72). Lipoktula is Medemla’s mother; Merensashi rapes a married Lipoktula, who is a mother of three, and impregnates her, who eventually goes on to give birth to Medemla. Lipoktula tries to stop an incestuous marriage between her daughter and Merensashi’s son, Insutemjen. As Lipoktula had kept the rape incident a secret, from her husband; she is scared beyond wits to let the marriage happen, as this would mean committing to a graver crime not only against her own flesh and blood but “also against a society where such marriages are banned; as in ancient times the penalty was death” (Ao 75). Medemla has an adopted daughter Martha, as she is abandoned by her father, just because her biological mother dies at child birth and her father rails against a cruel God who does not have the mercy to give him a son. At a time, when single unmarried mothers are unheard of, Martha gets adopted by Medemla, who feels a connect with her from the moment that she is born. However, the quo of identity gets contested in Martha’s day to day life.

There is the question of genetic and cultural disparity. Medemla is a fair complexioned Ao-Naga, and of medium height while Martha is “dark as a bat, with distinctly aboriginal features and a head of thick curly hair already showing signs of an Afro” (Ao 69). Medemla, in spite of all social resistances, goes ahead with her decision of adoption. She is made to resign from a Mission Hospital for something which the Sisters of the Mission had always preached, but could not accept. When Martha gets impregnated in school by her lover Apok; irrespective of what the society says, Medemla gets her married to him. When Martha delivers the baby after a hard and prolonged labour, the three women come together for a ritualistic acknowledgement of motherhood, a silent sacred ceremony which holds these women across three generations.

The narrative explores the fluidity of liminality, understands the factors behind it and also demonstrates how three women belonging to three different generations, move towards appropriating a social- cultural space for themselves. The story further intends to establish the assumption that in the narratives of the select Himalayan region, in spite of ‘fluid conjunctures’, which are unforced liminal moments, women undergo the ‘manipulation of affectivity’, crossing liminal spaces, without eliminating the spatial and temporal dimensions of liminality completely.

In *A Simple Question*, Temsula builds the narrative around Imdongla, from Nagaland, who though barely literate is otherwise a wordly-wise woman knowledgeable about the history and politics of the village (Ao 81). Her father and husband, both, are gaonburahs. Gaonburahs are appointed by the government to maintain order in their villages. During peacetime, these men enjoyed a privileged status but became vulnerable when hostilities broke out between the Nagas and the other states. The cruel collectors who levy double tax for rice make living very difficult. Imdongla's husband Tekaba is heavily under pressure, to save the villagers, but is unable to take a decision on his own. When Tekaba is imprisoned by the army, it is Imdongla who walks alone towards the jungle camp and with her powerful words, makes the captain revert his decision and lets Tekaba free. The captain is taken aback by the bravery of a coarse and illiterate village woman who unsettles his military confidence (Ao 87).

Mona Chettri opines in *Gender, Sexual/Other Identities in the Eastern Himalaya*, that "belonging is a difficult and sometimes controversial word, emotion and experience" (Chettri et al. 1). When the boundaries are fluid and shifting, 'belonging' becomes a forked word. The experiences of women from various parts of the Eastern Himalayas highlight the time, type and cause of rites of passage, with focus on geography, culture and religious upbringing and how it manipulates affectivity directly or indirectly. Chettri draws the reader's attention to the experiences of migrant women labourers at the borders and plantation areas. Topography has been considered a pertinent reason behind migrant labourers being scattered across borders. There are floating seasonal migrant labourers, and circular migrants who traverse borders every year during climatic and seasonal changes, from one territorial boundary to another and are in a state of fluidity. There is also always the quo of biological determinism that compares the productive work done by men versus the unproductive work done by women.

It is to be understood that gender, social, geographical, cultural, religious spaces and other aspects attributed to myths and folklore are contested by different women in the narratives in similar as well as different contexts, but in similar landscapes, along with the social, cultural and national rites of passage that can cause a liminal fluidity. Keeping in purview how the region is prone to cross-border infiltration and subsequent ethnic conflicts, the 'communitas' (Turner 112) in general maybe led to the acceptance of an "unforced" liminal moment (Horvarth et al. 89). "Each larger society contains within it several distinctly separate groupings.... In addition, all these groups break down into still smaller societies in subgroups" (Vizedom and Caffee 120).

"Everything from birth to death, is a part of territorial passage, crossing of borders into a culturally different regions, such as one where a different religion prevails" (Vizedom and Caffee 127). There is a subversion of single, unified, purist notions of identity, supplanted by a sense of identity, that occupies multiple cultural positions. According to Horvarth, experiencing a particularly significant event- migration or birth, death, life rituals- can cause a change in identity, prepared by the fluidity of the liminal situation. This is a transformative liminal situation that can undermine a previous intact identity which is entrapped in a precarious state to acquire a new ready-made identity (Horvarth et al. 213).

Gennep says that social groups have 'secular' as well as 'sacred' phases of liminality. Groups belonging to modern societies, practice customs that can be traced to an earlier sacred phase. Also, movement across borders can be called territorial rites of passage or crossing of borders into a culturally different region where a different religion may prevail. The theory of spatialization with reference to the production of social spaces analyses how individual women have contested the rites of passage in these spaces. As Henry Lefebvre says, "Social space is a (social product [...]) the space thus provided also serves as a tool of thought and of action [...] in addition to being a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (The Production of Space 165).

Women have to bear the brunt of constant surveillance and moral policing. In the *Three Women*, Medemla is chided for adopting a girl, inspite of being a single mother. In a family, the woman's role is often subjugated to objectification and as a play toy of the husband's sexual desires. There often is comparison between male virility and infidelity versus female sexuality and chastity. Proverbs like "*baari hernu dhanda bhaako, swaasni hernu gand bhaako*" stoically suggests how a man should look for a fertile land that would bring wealth, but marry a woman with goitre (Sherpa 67). Such examples show how female appearances are considered as a threat and carry forth the idea that men should marry ugly wives who cannot attract other men. The role that language plays in purporting and establishing gender biased roles, as dictated by the society, can cause an ideology of gender inequality.

4. CONCLUSION

Promoting liberal and practical education of citizens requires us to teach and learn how to conscientiously inhabit liminal spaces. The dimensions of fecundity and loss are endemic to liminality. The liminal does encourage invention, but if only through negation, it also affirms tradition. Experiences within the liminal, temporal, geographic or psychological space,

being in between two cultures, are marked by a sense of “double consciousness” leading to the liminality of identity. The pre-liminal rites which symbolise behaviours, signifying detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or cultural condition, passes through the ambiguous state of between and betwixt and enter the rites of incorporation. The rites of passage become consummated in this post liminal phase, where the individual is expected to follow the standard, moral and structure of that society and binding with the required social position of that system. The liminal threshold stage helps us to understand how people respond to liminality as an experience they undergo, how personality is shaped, foregrounding of agency and sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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