



Mapping the non-space: A psychoanalytic perspective on Dalit liminality

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Abstract

The core of liminality lies in occupying a transitional, often ambiguous space between two distinct states, identities or social orders. Discourses on liminality must consider complex intersections of factors like caste, religion and gender in a country like India. This study critically examines the impossibility of transcending caste and cultural boundaries in Indian scenario, through a psychoanalytical approach to liminality. M M Vindodini's short story "The Parable of a Lost Daughter: Luke 15: 11-32" captures the intricate dynamics of caste-based prejudice that governs social interactions and identity construction in Indian societies. This paper locates the Dalit Christian protagonist of the story at the intersection of Gennep and Turner's theoretical framework on liminality and Freud's tripartite classification of the human mind. It advocates that the protagonists' liminal space is not essentially one of transition, but is one that reveals the unfeasibility of transformation and that the liminal space itself is a self-imposed condition initiated by her ego. The study also aims to interrogate themes of caste, identity, consciousness, hypocrisy and social justice, contributing to scholarly discussions on the socio-psychological impact of caste and the limitations of liminality as a framework in socially stratified contexts.

Keywords: Caste, consciousness, ego, identity, liminality, space

Introduction

The term 'liminality' was first used by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his book *Rites de Passage* (1909). It was further developed by British anthropologist Victor Turner in the book *The Forest of Symbols* (1964). Gennep explained rites of passage in a three-stage pattern in *Rites de Passage*. He used "two sets of terms to describe the three phases of passage from one culturally defined state or status to another" (Turner 166)-the terms "separation, margin, and reaggregation", with reference to the ritualistic aspect and the terms "preliminal, liminal, and postliminal", "with reference to spatial transitions" (Turner 166). In his words, the first phase or 'rites of separation' "comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual...from an earlier fixed point in the social structure" (Turner 94). Here, the initiate gets stripped of his/her social identity, and as a result gets isolated from the rest of the community. The second phase is one in which "the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous" (Turner 94) and he/she "passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 94). This stage is characterised by a strict adherence to a programme of action enforced by a "master of ceremonies" (Szokolczai 148). During this stage, feelings of isolation is common since the initiate has no pre-destined identity. The final/post-liminal stage is that of incorporation in which the "passage is consummated" (Turner 95) and the initiate re-enters society with "a relatively stable state once more" (Turner 94).

The liminal stage is the second stage in the rites of passage, the in-between period during which a person has not yet fully achieved the new status. During this stage, the person holds neither his/her pre-ritual status nor a new status. This period can also be marked by a temporary suspension or reversal of established social hierarchies. This results from the initiate's impossibility to follow established norms as he/she waits for transition, following rules and regulations.

His/her identity, relationship to their environment, family, and society, and even time and space is variable in this stage.

The Liminal Space in "The Parable of a Lost Daughter: Luke 15: 11-32"

Renowned Dalit writer and activist Sharankumar Limbale has commented that Dalit literature is "distinct" (ix), since "Dalit reality is a liminal reality in time and space" (ix) in which the "content and form of the literature" (ix) is concerned with this liminality with "its own particular features" (ix). M. M Vinodini's short story "The Parable of a Lost Daughter: Luke 15: 11-32" captures the struggle of a Dalit Christian girl named Suvarthavani to navigate the liminal spaces between caste-based hierarchies and the instinctual drive towards dignity and equality. It highlights the themes of rootlessness and cultural disorientation Suvarthavani faces as she attempts to bridge the gap between her Dalit Christian identity and her friend Gayathri's Brahmin identity. As the story progresses, Suvarthavani's weariness towards her own caste's norms grows into an insatiable desire to assimilate into the Brahmin identity embodied by Gayathri. Suvarthavani's entire journey, from her initial attempts at adopting Gayathri's culture to her ultimate rejection of the object of desire, i.e. Gayathri's identity, if deliberated using Gennep's theoretical stand, reveals a tripartite structure. It is as follows:

1. Disengagement and Departure

As the story begins, Suvarthavani is keen on visiting Gayathri's Brahmin household despite her parent's premonitions regarding the chances of acceptance in a Brahmin household. She passionately defends Gayathri's family and admires them for their apparent aversion to caste-based and religious prejudices, all the while criticizing her own family for their "dirty and unkempt" (Vinodini 755) ways. As time progresses, she distances herself from her family and identity and tries to identify with Gayathri's

caste and community. She believes that it is easy to climb the caste hierarchy through ties of friendship and mutual affection. This is the first stage of Suvathavani's liminal journey, characterised by rites of separation as she departs from her own family and isolates herself, anticipating incorporation into Brahmin community and culture.

2. Navigating the In-Between

Turner defines "liminal entities" as those who are "neither here nor there", "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). In her liminal stage, Suvarthavani exists between her former identity and her desired one. This stage is marked by her attempts at assimilation on one side and her confrontation with reality on the other. As Suvarthavani visits Gayathri's home, she starts adopting cultural markers like bottu (an ornamental mark drawn or pasted on the forehead), to indicate her ongoing transition to Brahmin culture. In fact, Gayathri uses the word "transformed" (Vinodini 758) to refer to Suvarthavani's change on wearing the bottu.

As the story progresses, Suvarthavani attempts to overcome her threshold experience through various acts- she consciously mimics Gayathri's speech patterns, shortens her name to 'Vani', pretends to be obsessed over hygiene standards, delves into classical literature and Sanskrit studies and compromises on her own religious practices by "bunking church and wearing a red thread around her wrist" (Vinodini 759) and "wearing a bottu" (Vinodini 759). These acts offer Suvarthavani a feeling of having been accepted into Brahmin culture and tradition. The writer compares Suvarthavani's gradual assimilation into Gayathri's caste and culture to the act of "throwing away into the rubbish heap her crude, old and worn-out footwear made with cow leather", and "slipping effortlessly into a pair of delicate and comfortable fine sandals made of leaves" (Vinodini 759).

In this stage of Suvarthavani's liminal journey, she encounters unforeseen situations which forces her to confront reality for the first time. As Suvarthavani visits Gayathri's house to celebrate her sister's pregnancy, she gets discriminated and judged on account of her caste. That Gayathri herself is afraid of the possibility of Suvarthavani's identity being discovered by her relatives, disheartens her. She feels scrutinized and guilty, "like a thief who had been caught" (Vinodini 759-760). Yet, she holds on to the threshold experience, reassuring herself by accepting comments on how she "doesn't look like a harijan girl" (Vinodini 760) and oddly consoling herself, accepting all this as a part of her liminal state.

During the function, Suvarthavani is shattered as Gayathri refuses to apply turmeric to her feet, citing Brahmin customs that forbid touching the feet of harijans. This rejection deeply affects Suvarthavani emotionally, mainly because of Gayathri's willingness to apply turmeric to all kinds of feet—"feet sore from being constantly wet; feet that were coarse with cracked heels and rough skin; feet that were so dry that their skin was peeling away" and "feet that were dusty and dirty with toenails that were encrusted with mud" (Vinodini 760), as a part of their ritual. The fact that Gayathri is not repelled by the visible dirt that covers the feet of her relatives, but loathes the symbolic dirt that Suvarthavani supposedly carries, for she is born a Dalit, depresses her. Suvarthavani becomes aware that, despite her efforts to assimilate, she is still perceived as an outsider due

to her caste. She acknowledges the feelings of isolation and helplessness that underlie her attempts to assimilate into Brahmin culture. Thus, she confronts her reality and questions her liminal space for the first time.

3. Reconnection and Reincorporation

The final stage of rites of passage is characterised by reincorporation, where the individual is reintegrated into society, having adopted a new role or identity. But in Suvarthavani's case, this stage ironically involves her eventual rejection of attempts to fit into Brahmin culture and her acceptance of her own identity. In this stage, Suvarthavani gets a deeper understanding of herself and her community and is ultimately driven to a decision that puts an end to her liminal reality.

As Suvarthavani visits Gayathri's home after some years, she experiences first-hand the hypocrisy behind the family's purported ideals. She is asked to stay away from their kitchen and puja room and to her utmost shock, she witnesses Gayathri's father hurling severe abuses upon her mother as he comes home that night. He insults her by calling her names like "filthy bitch", "rotten old whore", "mala bitch", "madiga bitch", "christian bitch" (Vinodini 766) and so on. The realization that he who "has written many books saying that all human beings are equal" (Vinodini 755) is a hypocrite who harbours deep-seated contempt for people from lower castes and women appals her. Moreover, the obscene and crude language he uses shocks Suvarthavani since the values of respectability and morality has always come to be attached with upper-class culture. Suvarthavani later differentiates the way in which language is used in her community and that of Gayathri. She recalls how the same terms were used to express anger and at times, even love and affection in her community. As a result, Suvarthavani finds a newfound respect for her culture and identity.

Suvarthavani's opinion on Gayathri's brother-in-law too changes during this visit. He who outwardly upholds tradition and morality, also proves to be a hypocrite who engages in casual sexual escapades, for which he thinks low-caste women are easily available. He criticizes women from his own community saying, "My wife and Gayatri... they are always talking of tradition, morality, chastity and other such nonsensical stuff. They carry such notions in their heads. They are too orthodox. We cannot change them" (Vinodini 764). He addresses their adherence to tradition and morality as 'nonsensical stuff', and attacks their orthodoxy. On the other hand, he thinks a girl outside his cultural norms is an easy target for his sexual advances, equating her lack of adherence to tradition with her availability for his needs. He remarks about Christian women in general, "They really know how to use their freedom. They don't hesitate to sit close to you or to shake hands. They don't propose such sentimental nonsense as marriage. And what's more, you can hug them and roll around and kiss them just as you please, there's no danger of spoiling the bottu on their foreheads! (Vinodini 764). This comment shatters Suvarthavani and she feels as if "a sharp knife dug deep into her body and cut her open" (Vinodini 765). Here, he confuses tradition with chastity and uses it as a means to control women, all the while engaging in acts that defy both values. He takes Suvarthavani's consent for granted just on account of her caste. As Gopal Guru points out in his essay "Dalit Women

Talk Differently”, in the case of a Dalit woman, “it is not only caste and class identity” but also “gender positioning” that decides her social validity. (Guru 2548).

After these incidents, Suvarthavani becomes aware of the importance of caste in determining one’s sense of self and belonging and understands the importance of caste in determining social mobility in Indian society. As she is asked to wear bottu, hide her caste name and stay away from the pooja room and kitchen, she expects that it is a part of the rites of passage and she will be accepted as a part of Brahmin community in the post-liminal stage. It is in fact because of this that she doesn’t question the family’s attitude towards her at first. According to Turner, the liminal entities’ “behaviour is normally passive or humble”; they “obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint” (95). He writes, ‘It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life.’ (Turner 95). “Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized” (Turner 95) during liminality. After the above-mentioned incidents, however, Suvarthavani understands that this homogenization is impossible in her case due to her caste. She realizes the impossibility of transcending caste identity and negotiates the state of perpetual alienation she was subjected to for a while.

As a result, she undergoes transformation and achieves consciousness about her community and caste identity. She symbolically dons her Jesus pendant and throws her bottu into the dustbin. When Gayathri’s mother questions her about forgetting her bottu, Suvarthavani responds firmly, “No, Mother. I haven’t forgotten. I am a Christian girl. I am a Dalit girl” (Vinodini 767). In this moment of self-realization, Suvarthavani decisively steps out of the liminal space she has long inhabited.

Liminality: a “fantasy of structural superiority”

In the Ritual Process, Turner explains that the ritual of transition in the rites of passage occur “when inferiors affect the rank and style of superiors, sometimes even to the extent of arraying themselves in a hierarchy mimicking the secular hierarchy of their so-called betters” (167-168). He writes, “the liminality of the permanently structural inferior contains as its key social element a symbolic or make-believe elevation of the ritual subjects to positions of eminent authority” (Turner 168). Here, Suvarthavani is also subjected to a “make-believe elevation” of social status by herself. It is because of this that her liminal journey does not end with a linear transition into the Brahmin culture and instead, a return to her original, pre-liminal identity. Turner explains that liminality is characterised by “the weak” acting “as though they were strong” (Turner 168). In Suvarthavani’s case, she was “acting” as though she belongs to Brahmin community. The writer throws light upon Suvarthavani’s state of mind- “She was so anxious to speak, dress and behave like them. She had even taken to wearing a bottu just like Hindu girls, so that she would be seen as one of them. But despite all this, to them she was still a harijan girl, a Christian girl!” (Vinodini 765).

In Turner’s words, the liminality of the “weak” is a “fantasy of structural superiority”. (Turner 168). As the story ends, Suvarthavani realizes the futility of the idea of transitioning and understands that the distinctions have never actually

disappeared. Her assumption that it is easy to climb the caste hierarchy is challenged and the liminal space she navigates as she gets caught between her caste and that of Gayathri’s is put to test as the story progresses. Eventually, she realizes that her status will always be that of an outsider and that it is impossible to expect transition in a social fabric ridden by caste differences. Hence, her liminal space turns out to be an impossibility, a non-space which she thought she had been navigating for some time. Ultimately, she returns to her original identity, but now with a deeper understanding of who she is. Thus, Suvarthavani’s liminality indeed turns out to be a “fantasy of structural superiority”, a self-imposed condition that had never existed for real. Thus, Suvarthavani’s liminal space proves to be a mere object of desire of her psyche.

Liminal Space as the Ego’s Defence

The narrative can be reinvestigated in terms of the complex internal conflicts that Suvarthavani undergoes, using Sigmund Freud’s “structural theory of the mind, which visualizes the mind as divided into three distinct yet interacting agencies: the id, the ego and the super-ego” (Gay xxii). It is the interplay of these three zones in Suvarthavani’s psyche that takes the story forward. According to this model, id is that part of the mind concerned with impulses, urges and desires. Ego is that part in which “the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle” (Freud 4) and where the id is modified “by the direct influence of the external world” (Freud 18). The super-ego is concerned with internalized social and moral standards.

In Suvarthavani’s case, as her liminal journey ends, she is reincorporated into her Dalit community and identity, instead of getting accepted into the Brahmin community. She understands that she was only under the false impression that she was undergoing transition. If the entire journey is investigated in Freudian terms, it is Suvarthavani’s id which cultivates the desire of climbing the caste hierarchy and adopting Brahmin culture. It is her id which manifests in her acts of assimilation. However, her ego, makes her confront the reality, especially as she fears a possible discovery of her caste identity and as she gets excluded from the turmeric ritual at Gayathri’s house. Since ego is that part of the id which comes in contact with the “external world”, it gradually makes Suvarthavani realize that it is impossible to realize her id of achieving social mobility through transitioning. It is in the face of the id’s impossibility to realize its full potential, that the ego employs defence mechanisms (A. Freud 21). In this case, Suvarthavani’s id finds it difficult to accept the plight and thereby, the ego is forced to adopt defence mechanism. Here, Suvarthavani’s defence mechanism is the liminal space which she thinks she is occupying, as a part of her transition. This is appropriated by her ego, so that she will not have to accept the disheartening truth of the impossibility to satisfy her id. In his essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, Freud explains defence mechanism thus:

A particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from inside, but from outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them (23)

Even though she unwittingly encounters the futility of transcending caste boundaries several times, she represses her doubts and tries to find relief in the self-imposed liminal space. She accepts the trials and tribulations at Gayathri's home as a part of her liminal space and hopelessly waits for the post-liminal status she will acquire shortly. Here, repression is a mode of defence mechanism employed by Suvarthavani's ego, by which she blocks unacceptable thoughts and memories.

Freud explains in his book *The Ego and the Id* that super-ego is that part of the unconscious which indicates "a differentiation within the ego, which may be called the ego ideal" (22). This develops during early childhood through identification with parental figures and internalizing their values, beliefs, and moral standards. Freud advocates that super-ego, "gives permanent expression to the influence of the parents" and "it perpetuates the existence of the factors to which it owes its origin" (31). The super-ego operates as a judgemental force and has the power to exercise "moral censorship" (33). It evaluates ego's actions based on moral standards. The "ego ideal" (an imaginary ideal picture of one's own self) comes from super-ego.

In Suvarthavani's case, her super-ego comes to play towards the end of the story. As she hears the language used by Gayathri's father to address his mother, she feels a respect for her community for the first time. She recalls how members of her community never use such language while conversing with their dear ones. Here, Suvarthavani's super-ego makes her reevaluate her attempts (by ego) to assimilate into Brahmin culture (which was a realization of her id). As the super-ego evaluates ego's actions using moral standards, the ego-ideal emerges. Here, Suvarthavani encounters her ego ideal, which respects her culture, community and heritage. This makes her reconnect with herself and her caste, religion and community. As a result, she acknowledges and accepts her true identity and takes pride in the same. In Freud's words, Suvarthavani encounters her "archaic heritage" (33), and it helps her retain the sense of self-respect and self-importance which has remained dormant for long, thereby leading to ultimate self-realization and acceptance. Thus, it is her super-ego which is responsible for Suvarthavani's ultimate transformation.

Therefore, while Suvarthavani's id cultivates her desire for transitioning into the desired status, her ego represses the negative experiences that characterise the process, and employs liminal space as a defence mechanism to cope with the same and her super-ego re-evaluates the whole situation and re-establishes her respect for her identity and heritage. Interestingly, in this case, the three stages of rites of passage also correspond to Freud's tripartite division of the human mind, i.e. her id materializes in the first phase of the rites of passage ("Disengagement and Departure") as she longs to cross caste barriers and belong to Gayathri's family and culture, her ego manifests in the second phase ("Navigating the In-between"), as she encounters the bitter realities associated with assimilating into upper-caste culture and employs the defence mechanism of a liminal space to overcome the same, and her super-ego comes to play in the third phase ("Reconnection and Reincorporation") as she re-orientes herself as a Dalit Christian and puts an end to her quest for identity.

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