
LIMINALITY IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S THE ICE CANDY MAN

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Received: May 2019 Accepted: Jun. 2019 Published: Jul. 2019

Abstract: *The Ice Candy Man (ICM)* depicts the harsh reality of communal atrocities and the charged-up political scenario during the time of partition of India and how the characters in the novel become victims of such atrocities. Religion also plays an important role in creating socio-cultural groups within a multi-cultural society. The members of these socio-cultural groups may find themselves in an 'in-between' state. This state falls under the nature and scope of liminality. Within this 'transitory' space and time, the paper examines how the concept of liminality as defined by anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, can be applied in understanding the complexity of such transitory space and time. The paper will examine how liminality can be seen within the idea of threshold, or a state of being 'in-between'. Similarly, the paper will examine how the three phases to crossing the threshold as espoused by the two anthropologists can be seen in *ICM*.

Keywords: In-Between, Liminality, Liminal Space, Separation, Transition.

Introduction: Liminality is derived from the Latin, 'limen', which means 'threshold'. The idea of liminality was applied in the domain of anthropology during 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep in his notable work *Les rites de passage*. Anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep says that there are three phases to crossing the threshold. The first phase is separation; the second is transition, and the final stage is incorporation. The second stage of transition is the stage in which liminality takes place. It is during the transition period that a person enters a liminal state wherein he or she has been separated from the community or society but are not yet integrated in to a new community. In 1960s, Victor Turner another famous anthropologist re-discovered the importance of liminality. Turner emphasizes on the second or middle stage of rites of passage that is the transitional stage which he calls the liminal stage. Turner observes that "the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible' (Turner, 95). He further says, "liminal entities are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (Turner, 94-95).

Liminality as a concept in literature can be adopted to describe a person on the threshold or on the border where the identity of the person or being is divided and discourses in relation to this being are fragmented. The land of India was divided to end colonial rule which caused fragmentation of a nation. *The Ice Candy Man* is also published under a different title as *Cracking India*, the title signifies fragmentation and all fragments are liminal as they are separated from a concrete and whole entity. The regions were forced to become dominated by one religious group thus the liminality of those regions can be realized as they undergo transformation. The period between colonial stage and post-colonial stage of undivided India during the partition time comes under the umbrella term of liminal period.

As per the three phases of rites of passage, the first phase of 'separation' in the novel can be experienced when Ayah is abducted from Warris road in Lenny's presence. Both of these characters are forcibly separated due to communal violence. Lenny is emotionally attached to her Ayah, and hence her abduction leaves a deep impact on the little girl as she comes of age. Another episode of separation is experienced when the country was being divided on religious grounds where no single region was wholly Muslim, Sikh, Hindu or Parsee. Families and communities were displaced and got separated in an attempt to flee and save their lives. Hari the gardener is forced to change his religion and thus gets separated from his culture and community. He has to come to terms of becoming a Muslim and his new name Himmat Ali. He is forced to forget his former Hindu self. He also undergoes bodily changes such as shaving off his birth tuft of hair called *bhodhi* and getting circumcised. His attire too changes from *dhoti* a cloth piece wrapped around the lower body, waist-down to drawstrings trouser called *salwar* which was the preferred attire of the Muslim community.

At the second level that is the 'transition' phase, the novel presents how the main characters are in a transitory mode because of the communal riots, including the place where the narrative unfolds that is Lahore. Lahore as a place holds a nostalgic remembrance for the people that experienced mass migration during the partition of India. It was a place that was once unified by many socio-cultural groups and as seen in the narrative, the place witnesses many hostile groups that change the scenario of this once peaceful place named Lahore.

At the third level that is of 'incorporation', the novel however does not clearly deal with this phase. We as readers are left to guess whether Ayah reaches Amritsar peacefully and reunites with her family. Also, the re-integration of the Ice-candy man in mainstream society is not dealt with.

In the narrative, we as readers observe that the 'positions assigned'(Turner,95) to the characters are clearly defined: Ayah is a Hindu maid and Lenny's care-taker, the Ice-Candy man is a Muslim youth who is basically unemployed, and Lenny is a polio stricken Parsee child. But they all become liminal entities as they inter-mingle within the social convention. As per custom, Ayah does not sport the traditional attire. She wears saris in imitation of another set of socio-cultural groups. Thus, she is mimicking those she holds superior than herself. Ayah belongs to the lower working-class. When Ice-candy man asks Ayah why she wears saris and not the Punjabi shalwar kameez (traditional dress), Ayah responds that Goan maids, (mainly Catholic and are preferred by the English and the Indian elite), who wear saris are paid more by their employers than those maids who wear the traditional Punjabi dress. Ayah adopts a different or distinguishing mode of dress to earn a higher salary and to secure a sound position within her Westernized Parsee employer's house. She had to exit her original life style to adapt to a new one. This façade of being a different person keeps her in transition, hence it is a liminal state.

Lenny is in an in-between state as she comes of age. She is neither a little child nor an adolescent. Lenny participates in various social and cultural activities like meeting Ayah's friends in the park, attending little Pappoo's marriage who lives in the servant quarters behind Lenny's house, and visiting her God-mother frequently. Her keen observation of the people around her and how they interact with each other contribute to her learning of the adult world. These social interactions are the initiation rites that usher her into the coming of age phase. Her exposure to Ayah's rendezvous' in the park leaves her bewildered and curious. She gets confused as to whom should she trust among Ayah's group of admirers. She is betrayed by

the Ice-candy man for telling the truth. During the raging riots in Lahore at the time of partition, Ice-candy man was blinded with revenge and along with the mob he attacked Lenny's home to seek out Hindus that were in hiding. Lenny confided to him where her Hindu Ayah was hiding in the house.

According to Turner the threshold stage is where the individual dispossesses what he had or leaves behind his former self and belongings as this is a stage of uncertainty whereby new rules or a new way of life is bound to take place. The liminal being in the transitional stage is socially ambiguous. This is very apt for the character of the Ice-candy man. He dispossesses his former way of life many a times and appears to change his occupation and personality all too frequently. His position amongst the group that meets in the public garden is ambiguous. He appears as a salesman and at times as a holy-man carrying a telephone to connect to Allah. This transitioning from appearing professional to buffoonery renders him liminal. Lenny observes this transition of the Ice-candy man in the various roles that he adopts as an ice cream vendor, a bird seller, a cosmic connector to Allah via telephone, a pimp and finally a repenting lover of Ayah. The Ice-candy man keeps changing his trade and character from happy-go-lucky to revengeful, and thereby can be said to be in a transitory phase. As Ayah always entertained him (sometimes reluctantly), Lenny is left to guess whether he is trustworthy or not. The little girl was horribly shattered when she trusted him and he in turn did not protect but rather assaulted her Ayah. Lenny after telling the truth scrubs her tongue hard till it bleeds. She is also filled with remorse and slips into self-condemnation as she believes herself to be the real culprit that betrayed Ayah. We observe that Lenny becomes a liminal entity as she disclaims her former self while she learns that women get raped by men to avenge each other. Men were trying to establish their religion's superiority over each other by violence which extended to the brutality of sexually assaulting women. During this period, we as readers witness Lenny's 'coming of age' a state which is a liminal period as she is neither innocent like a child nor as experienced as an adult. Lenny and Ayah both are marginalized; the former is a Parsee girl child and the latter a labourer woman; and after the kidnapping incident both attain a liminal status. Lenny ceases to be her former self and feels doomed for telling the truth. The little girl gets engrossed in her speculations of 'telling the truth' to be virtuous or evil. Ayah too ceases to be her former self and her identity is completely altered as she is abducted, tortured, and forced to convert to Islam.

The partition time was very horrendous and traumatic as many women were kidnapped, raped and later labelled as fallen women. There was a camp near Warris road for these recovered women. Lenny's Ayah is kidnapped because of the religious riots and killings at the time of partition. Ayah was betrayed by Lenny and abducted by Ice-candy man. She was gang raped and forced into prostitution by Ice-candy man. Ayah dispossess her former self after the abduction from Warris road. She is forced to become Mumtaz at Hira Mandi and starts to learn a new way of life which she despises and wants to escape.

The idea of liminal characters takes us to another level of understanding liminality and that is 'liminal space'. When Ice-candy-man abducts Ayah to Hira Mandi, she is metaphorically abducted into an empty space as she sinks into oblivion. She is homeless and unprotected by the people she used to live with. In this homeless space of Hira Mandi, she disowns her former self. Hira Mandi, which means the Diamond Market is not what it seems to be. Here the diamonds refer to the glittering dancing girls, who are sold or forced into prostitution. We as readers see that Ayah has disowned her former self and is at the threshold of a new way of life. Ayah struggles through the passage from Warris Road to Hira Mandi, that is through being

secure to insecurity. At Hira Mandi she does not know what lies ahead. Whether she would be rescued or not. This place is a liminal space as Ayah undergoes transformation and there is a lot of turmoil within this chaotic place.

Lahore is often described with nostalgic reminiscence by Lahoris. The author Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to the diaspora living in the U.S. Her perspective of Lahore, where she hails from, as depicted by her in her novel showcases the imagining of the homeland. Lahore is imagined by diasporic communities with longing and nostalgia as mass migration took place during the partition of India. Lahore is referred to with nostalgia as it is a symbol of the shared partition history of the two neighbouring countries. As a space, it was in transition when the war leading to the partition of India started. Religious atrocities made it impossible for various people to meet-up in the same space. Ayah's admirers met in the same space without discord and animosity. When the colonial power over the land degenerated, it resulted in tensions between the communities, they could no longer meet one another in the same space affably. Lahore was caught between two nations to be formed or two utopias. Utopias are imagined perfect places but they are also unreal spaces. Utopias do not exist on a map and hence are not concrete spaces. Utopia presents a promising picture of a perfect society. Therefore, the formation of two utopias: the Muslim nation-Pakistan and Hindu nation -Hindustan starts from a concrete space Lahore. Lahore is shown in the process of getting transformed both culturally and politically. Fire engulfs the city of Lahore when communal violence ravages it. The burning of Lahore signifies that new beginnings for the city are bound to happen. It has to start anew. The characteristics that the city presents during this time correspond to that of a liminal space. There is transformation socially, the entire city is in transition phase and there is chaos. Hence, it can be said that Lahore is a liminal space in *The Ice candy Man*.

Conclusion: For liminality to take pace the two most important phases that of separation and transition can be seen in *ICM*. It is also seen that the various characters are in a constant flux of change, especially that of Ayah, Lenny and Ice-candy man. What has also been observed is that liminal characters develop within liminal spaces. Lahore as a liminal space affects its inhabitants as it is swept by a huge wave of chaos and change.

The characters of Lenny, Ayah and the Ice-candy man are in a liminal phase. Each one is in a transitioning phase preparing to move across the limits of what one was before the partition into what one would be after the partition.

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