

Liminality in Post-Colonial Theory: A Journey from Arnold van Gennep to Homi K. Bhabha

Arup Ratan Chakraborty

ABSTRACT

*The term 'liminality' comes from the Latin limen meaning 'threshold'. Liminal space is the in-between location of cultural action, in which according to various cultural theorists, anthropologists and psychologists meaning is produced. The idea was introduced to the field of anthropology in 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep in **Les Rites de Passage (The Rites of Passage)**. Van Gennep describes rites of passage as a three-part structure: separation, transition (liminal period) and incorporation. The terms 'liminal' and 'liminality' gained popularity through the writings of Victor Turner in the second half of the twentieth century. This paper analyses the theorization of liminality by Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner and Homi K. Bhabha. Bhabha in particular has stressed the importance of border locations as the threshold environment. In **Location of Culture** (1994), he refers to liminality as a transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change. The term 'liminality' has particular importance in post-colonial theory, since it identifies the interstitial environment in which cultural transformation can take place and new discursive forms are constituted.*

Key words: liminality, Gennep, Turner, Bhabha, hybridity, post-colonial

The word 'liminality' or 'liminal'¹ is derived from the Latin *limen* meaning 'threshold'. Liminal space is the 'in-between' location of cultural action, in which according to various cultural theorists, anthropologists and psychologists meaning is produced. The literal meaning of 'threshold' hardly needs any specification: it is the sill of a doorway, which has to be crossed when entering a house. It indicates the point at which the public outside world ends and the private, familial inside world begins. In more general terms it marks the place,

line or border at which a passage can be made from one space to another. Such a spatial structure has an essential influence on social interactions: relationships and social status are negotiated at the threshold; one is either rejected from or welcomed to the other side. The term 'threshold' evokes images of entering and leaving, passages, crossings and change. It marks the point at which choices and decisions must be made in order to move on, and it would be unusual to think of it as a place to stay, a place of permanent existence.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Santal Bidroha Sardha Satabarshiki Mahavidyalaya, Goaltore, Paschim Medinipur

There are, however, situations in the lives of people in which transitions from an old situation to a new one, one social position to another, are hampered or cannot be completed successfully. Individuals who are caught in between two stages of development, who do not hold clearly defined positions within their social system, feel marginal, excluded, without identity or influence.

Liminality has specific importance in post-colonial theory as it identifies the interstitial environment in which cultural transformation takes place. In literary, post-colonial, and cultural studies the concept has been successfully adopted to circumscribe a being on the border, or on the threshold, dividing distinct spheres, identities or discourses. Homi K. Bhabha, in particular, has “stressed the importance of BORDER locations as the threshold environment, where subjectivity finds itself poised between sameness and ‘alterity’ and new discursive forms are constituted” (Thieme 144). Ashcroft et al. provide a useful discussion of liminality in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*:

The importance of the liminal for post-colonial theory is precisely its usefulness for describing an ‘in-between’ space in which cultural change may occur: the transcultural space in which strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated, a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states. (130)

Homi K. Bhabha refers to liminality as a transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change:

“This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 4). Bhabha’s theory focuses on the signifying practices rather than actual in-between spaces; however, liminal discourses can relate to “a range of physical sites including several which have had particular importance in the post-colonial experience” (Thieme 144). These include geographical borders, market places, ocean crossing, seashores and various other kinds of thresholds. In surrealist thinking, the “liminal has been seen as the threshold stage between waking and dream, or the conscious and subliminal state of awareness” (ibid. 144). In psychology, the term indicates the “threshold between the sensate and the subliminal, the limit below which a certain sensation ceases to be perceptible. The sense of the liminal as an interstitial or in-between space, a threshold area distinguishes the term from the more definite word ‘limit’ to which it is related” (Ashcroft et al. 130). I shall attempt in this paper to outline the concept of liminality in post-colonial context. I shall trace the origin of the concept of liminality and its theorization in the twentieth century.

The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the word ‘liminal’ first appeared in publication in the field of psychology in 1884, but the idea was introduced to the field of anthropology in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work, *Les Rites de Passage*.² The expression ‘rites of passage’ was developed by Van Gennep. Van Gennep described rites of passage such as coming-of-age rituals and marriage as having the following three-part structure: rites of separation (*séparation*),

transition rites (*marge*) and rites of incorporation (*aggrégation*) (Gennep 11). The initiate (i.e., the person undergoing the ritual) is first stripped off the social status that he or she possessed before the ritual, inducted into the liminal period of transition, and finally given his or her new status and reincorporated into society. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century, though, that the terms ‘liminal’ and ‘liminality’ gained popularity through the writings of Victor Turner³. Turner borrowed and expanded upon Van Gennep’s concept of liminality, ensuring widespread usage of the concept not only in anthropology but other fields as well.

Van Gennep considered rites of initiation to be the most typical rite. To gain a better understanding of “tripartite structure” of liminal situations, one can look at a specific rite of initiation: the initiation of “youngsters into adulthood,” which Turner considered the most typical rite (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 155). In such rites of passage, the experience is highly structured. The first phase (the rites of separation) requires the child to go through a separation from his family; this involves his/her ‘death’ as a child, as childhood is effectively left behind. In the second stage, initiate, between childhood and adulthood, must pass a ‘test’ to prove that he is ready for adulthood. If he succeeds, the third stage (incorporation) involves a celebration of the ‘new birth’ of the adult and a welcoming of that being back into society.

Van Gennep shows a special interest in the transitional phase: it is the period in which a person is in-between the former and the future social position or magico-religious state⁴. In order to

illustrate his point he refers to those early times in human history when countries did not border directly on each other but were divided by a neutral zone. In this zone, travellers found themselves in a special situation as neither laws of the adjoining countries applied – they “wavered between two worlds”, as it were (Gennep 18). Like this territorial passage, non-territorial transitions also consist of a moment or period of uncertainty, a liminal period. Such a period is accompanied by, or equal to, a life-crisis. ‘Crisis’ in this context is an interesting choice of vocabulary and could easily be misinterpreted. Van Gennep does not refer to the term in a strictly psychological sense. He uses it to indicate the unstable social or magico-religious position of the person who undergoes a change: during the transition the state of that person remains uncertain as he or she has been separated from a clearly defined state in the past and has not been incorporated yet into a clearly defined future state.

Van Gennep’s theories were further elaborated by the anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner made a lasting contribution to the study of ritual symbols. With reference to Van Gennep’s concept of rites of passage, Turner made a significant theoretical study of the function of ritual transitional phase and its similarity to other cultural dramas of change in individual and social life. In his books *The Ritual Process* (1969) and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (1974), Turner developed the idea that human social life is characterized by the existence of an alternation between structured social roles and the blurring of social roles (i.e., anti-structure) which occurs in the ritual context. He finds anti-structure an essential feature of

human existence because it is through the operation of anti-structure that human beings gain an understanding of their humanity and spirituality. Structure and anti-structure are linked dialectically, the former providing continuity and the latter affirming the significance of discontinuity.

Homi K. Bhabha has reconceived concepts of cultural hybridity and social liminality in his work, *The Location of Culture* (1994). However, there is also a counter point found while discussing the term 'hybridity' in colonial discourse. Hybridity sometimes, is associated with a sense of abuse for those who are the products of mixed breeds. However, since the concept of hybridity occupies a central place in the postcolonial discourses, it is no more a term of abuse but it is celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference.

Robert J. C. Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (1995) provides a thorough genealogy of the term hybridity, tracing its elaboration in various Victorian discourses of race and miscegenation, including Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races*, Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Bryan Edwards's *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* and S. G. Morton's *Crania Aegyptica*. The question of the fertility of racial hybrids was crucial to Victorian theories of polygenism and monogenism: "The claim that humans were one or several species (and thus equal or unequal, same or different) stood or fell over the question of hybridity, that is intra-racial fertility"

(Young, *Colonial Desire* 8). Furthermore, hybridity was a key term in managing and explaining the ambivalent colonial attraction to and repulsion from racial Others. "Theories of race were thus also covert theories of desire" (ibid), and Young identifies "the [sado-masochistic] violence of colonial desire" (Young, *Colonial Desire* 108). Robert Young refers to the term hybrid as a cross between two different species. A hybrid is technically a cross between two different species and that therefore the term hybridization evokes the botanical notion of inter-species grafting and Young cautions us to remember that when we invoke the concept of cultural hybridity "we are utilizing the vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right as much as the notion of an organic process of the grafting of diversity into singularity" (Young, *Colonial Desire* 10). Young has remarked on the negativity sometimes associated with the term hybridity. He notes how it was influential in imperial and colonial discourse in giving damaging reports on the union of different races. Young would argue that at the turn of the century, 'hybridity' had become part of a colonialist discourse of racism. In Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to be a Creole or a 'hybrid' was essentially negative. They were reported as lazy and the dangers of such hybrids inevitably reverting to their 'primitive' traditions are highlighted throughout the novel. In reading Young alongside Rhys, it becomes easy to see the negative connotations that the term once had.

For Bhabha, hybridity is the process adopted by the colonial governing authority to translate the identity of the colonized (the other) within a singular framework; however such exercise is futile as it fails to produce something either familiar or

new. This new hybrid identity emerges from the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and the colonized, and challenges the authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity. Furthermore, Bhabha introduces us to the 'third space' along with the concept of hybridity. This 'third space', according to him, emerges out of a tension between two cultures. In his essay "Cultures In-Between", he talks about the 'partial culture' which he describes as "the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures." He further explains "it is indeed something like culture's in-between, baffling both alike and different" (Bhabha "Cultures" 54). This 'third space' not only seems to be the juncture of translations and dialogues; it also raises questions towards the essentially rooted ideas of identity and the notional concepts surrounding the original culture. Thus this 'third space' marks a new beginning of possibility in terms of meaningful identification and even productivity that the new identity carries with it. This newer opening not only questions the established notions of culture and identity but also provides new forms of cultural meaning; and thereby it significantly suspends the limits of the boundaries. The 'third space', therefore, is a place of opportunity for the growth of fresh ideas and it rejects anything fixed, so it opens up newer scope for fresh thoughts allowing us to go beyond the rigidity and limited focus of colonial binary thinking. Instead of exclusion and rejection, the new space, thus, has the capacity and tendency to include and accept.

While discussing the 'third space', Homi Bhabha justifies his stand substantially as his concept of hybridity is based on the idea that no culture is really pure as it is always in contact with

the other. According to him, Hybridization is an ongoing process; it, therefore, cannot be 'still'. The happenings on the borderline cultures and in-between cultures have been prime concerns for him. For him the Location of Culture is special and sequential and the terms 'hybridity' and 'liminality' refer to space as well as time.

Homi Bhabha's term, 'hybridity' in colonial text, answers Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in the affirmative way. It indicates that subaltern has spoken. Here the term 'hybridity' conjures up the notion of 'in-betweenness' which is further elaborated by the accompanying concept of 'Diaspora'. The term 'Diaspora' evokes the specific terms of displacement but it loses its poignancy due to the effect of 'hybridity'. It means that the term 'hybridity' bridges the gap between the West and the East that is the colonizer and the colonized. The term 'hybridity', thus serves as a bridge narrowing down the distance between the West and the East, the colonizer and the colonized, the Occident and the Orient. The construct of such a shared culture saw the colonizer and the colonized being mutually dependent on each other. Aiming at describing the identity of self and others, Bhabha says:

It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences- literature, art, music, ritual life, death... and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation—migration, diaspora,

displacement, relocation...Makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural(ized), unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of cultures particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, unsettling advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition. (Bhabha 247).

The terms diaspora, displacement and relocation exhibit the dynamic nature of culture. Since the historical narratives on which culture tries to define itself are inconsistent, culture must be seen along with the context of its construction. Thus, the term 'hybridity' can be viewed as a liberating power from the domination of colonizers forced upon the colonized by the formers' bounded definitions of race, language and nation.

Another significant aspect while dealing with the diasporic experience is the concept of 'home'. Whether it is forced or voluntary migration, one leaves one's own country and settles in a foreign land. This migratory displacement leaves the migrant with the sense of homelessness and rootlessness. The migrants miss their own native land or homeland. This 'homelessness' according to Bhabha can be real as well as metamorphical. He uses the word 'uncanny' which means 'unhomely', to explain his homelessness:

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees ; gathering on the

edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafes of city centres: gathering in the half-life, half light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language: gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively: gathering the past in a ritual or revival; gathering the present. Also the gathering of people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned: the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statues, immigration status. (Bhabha 139).

Bhabha has candidly observed the migrant experiences which are full of dualities. He brings out the uncanniness of the migrant experience through a series of ideas like 'half life', 'partial presence', 'gathering the past', 'edge of foreign cultures' and other such experiences that the migrants go through. The migrants live a 'half life' in a foreign land as they are not able to accept the new land completely. Their memories of homeland haunt them and many times they live reviving their past. This experience of living a partial life is sometimes very disturbing for the migrants. The second generation migrants do not, perhaps, have the same nostalgic feeling as the first generation migrants have; however they, too, are linked to their homeland through the stories they hear from their parents. The picture of homeland created before them is based on what they have heard from their parents. Salman Rushdie, an Indian by origin, also talks about this partial identity of the migrants.

In his “Imaginary Homelands” he states:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools, but however ambiguous and shifting the ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. (Rushdie 15)

This experience of being ‘in-between’ two cultures is what the diaspora comes across in the foreign land. Sigmund Freud, a pioneer of the psychoanalysis, offers the definition of uncanny: “the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 124). Giving this definition, Freud makes the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ definitions equivalent. According to him, it is through self observation and self objectification only that the uncanny can be analysed and understood. As per the theory of psychoanalysis, the uncanny is not something that we have control on and nor can we access it directly. This feeling of uncanny as an involuntary recurrence of the old and the familiar is very close to what Freud calls ‘repetition compulsion’ which actually refers to the way in which our mind repeats the traumatic experiences in order to deal with them. The psychoanalysts believe that the traces of the past experiences remain present in the mind and they tend to surface in the present life of the human beings. This uncanniness breeds a feeling of alienation in the ‘other land’. However, such a sense of alienation is not a problem but very much a part of the diasporic experience. In fact, the sense of alienation proves to be a driving force to re-evaluate our identities and it should be considered as an

opportunity. It does the job of opening up a space for us to reconsider how we have come to be and who we are. Bhabha talks about this sense of uncanniness of culture in the following manner:

Culture is heimlich, with its disciplinary generalizations, its mimetic narratives, its homologous empty line, its seriality, its progress, its customs and coherence. But cultural authority is also unheimlich, for to be distinctive, signficatory, influential and identifiable, it has to be translated, disseminated, differentiated, interdisciplinary, intertextual, international, interracial. (Bhabha.136-7)

Culture has a dual identity as the notions of it being homely, on the one hand and unhomely on the other always keeps it ever changing. The migrants represent this dual nature of culture, since they are always looked at as being tossed in between both: their ‘original culture’ and the culture of the ‘new land’.

In most of his works, Bhabha considers the interrelations and interdependence between the colonisers and the colonised. Through the colonial experience, the social categories exerted on the colonised (the ideas of superior and inferior human races and cultures for instance) imprints an imaginary, which collides with their own, displacing or disjuncting it. This encounter eventually creates new hybrid expressions of culture which in turn challenge the beliefs and experience of the colonisers. Bhabha argues that these colonial – and postcolonial – cultural systems and statements are constructed in a “liminal space”: the “Third Space of Enunciation” (Bhabha 209). The aim of his argument is the deconstruction the colonisers’

(and more generally Western and modern) essentialist claims of an inherent purity of culture.

Bhabha also describes the process of creating culture by debunking the idea of a nation or people as being holistic and pure. He says:

Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other. [...] The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation – the place of utterance – is crossed by the *difference* of writing.It is this difference in the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent. (*Location* 36)

In other words, a national culture can never be holistic and pure because its meaning, like other products of language, is open to ambivalence, open to interpretations by the audience which is different from the originator's intent. So, in the postcolonial discourse, the Colonizer's culture, far from being the simple, oppressive force upon the Colonized culture, is open to ambivalence. In explaining Edward Said's description of Orientalism, Robert Young states that "Bhabha argues that even for the colonizer the construction of a representation of the Other is by no means straightforward" (Young, "Ambivalence," 143). The Colonizer, in trying to objectify the Colonized, creates a stereotype of the Colonized in order to reject it as inferior: "Colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha "Other Question," 93). The Colonizer creates an image of

the Colonized and thinks that this image is holistic and pure, i.e., not open to ambivalence. But confrontation with the Colonized causes the Colonizer to see that this stereotype, which Bhabha says "dramatizes the impossible desire for a pure, undifferentiated origin" is "an impossible object" ("Other Question," 103). The Colonized culture's difference displaces the Colonizer's own sense of unity and makes the Colonizer aware of its split self, which desires the Colonized to validate the created stereotype in order that it may see the Colonized as a fixed object.

Notes

1. The meaning of 'liminal' is taken from *Oxford English Dictionary*, Edited by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner; 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. The *OED* has an entry for 'liminal,' the adjectival form, which it lists as a rare usage: "Of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process."
2. Arnold Van Gennep (1873–1957), a noted French ethnographer and folklorist, used the term liminality in his *Rites de Passage*, published in 1909, a work that is essential to the development of the concept of liminality in the context of rituals in small-scale societies. The English translation, *The Rites of Passage* was published in 1960. The book was translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, and published by Routledge (London) & Kegan Paul. Van Gennep began his book by identifying the various categories of rites. He distinguished between those that result in a change of status for an individual or social

group, and those that signify transitions in the passage of time. In doing so, he placed a particular emphasis on three-fold sequential structure rites of passage.

3. Victor Witter Turner (1920–1983) was a British cultural anthropologist. He is best known for his work on symbols, rituals and rites of passage. Turner is considered to have re-discovered the importance of liminality, first came across Arnold van Gennep's work in 1963 (Thomassen 2006, 322). In 1967 he published his book *The Forest of Symbols*, which included an essay entitled *Between: the Liminal Period in Rites of Passage*. Within the works of Turner, liminality began to wander away from its narrow application to ritual passages in small-scale societies. In the various works he completed while conducting his fieldwork amongst the Ndembu in Zambia, he made numerous connections between tribal and non-tribal societies, "sensing that what he argued for the Ndembu had relevance far beyond the specific ethnographic context" (Thomassen 2009, 14).
4. By 'magico-religious' Van Gennep means 'profane' and 'sacred'. However, he does not understand 'sacred' as a term that is limited in its application: "The sacred is not an absolute value but one relative to the situation. The person who enters a status at variance with the one previously held becomes 'sacred' to the others who remain in the profane state". Solon

T. Kimbell, introduction, *The Rites of Passage*, by Arnold van Gennep, viii-ix.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. 1996, "Culture's In-Between." *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay. Eds. SAGE Publication, London. pp. 53-60. Print.
- —. 1994, *The location of Culture*, Routledge, New York, Print.
- —. 1996, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism." *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Ed. Baker, Houston A. Chicago: U of Chicago, Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2003, *The Uncanny*, Penguin, New York. Print.
- Gennep, Arnold van. 1960, *The Rites Of Passage*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1991, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*, London. Print.
- Thieme, John. 2003, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Essential Glossary*, London, Print.
- Thomassen, B. 2006, "Liminality", A Harrington, B. Marshall and H.P. Müller (eds) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Routledge, London, pp. 322-323. Print.
- Turner, Victor. 1969, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Aldine Pub. Chicago, Print.
- Young, Robert. 1990, "The Ambivalence of Bhabha." *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. Routledge, London, Print.
- —. 1995, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. Routledge, London, Print.