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Betwixt and Between: Aspects of Liminality in Mahasweta Devi's "Operation? Bashai Tudu"

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Abstract

Liminality and postcolonial narratology parallelly question stable identities and dominant hierarchies, examining definite classification and sharp boundaries, thus often coexisting. Mahasweta Devi's fictions generally explore the lives of tribals in post-independence India covering a wide range of relationships of domination, dependence and those in-between. This paper aims to show how the inherent power-dynamics between the 'authority' and the 'marginalized' allow Devi to explore the liminality of 'revolution' in her novella "Operation? Bashai Tudu". Using arguments proposed by Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner and Yi-Fu Tuan, I have explained how "Operation? - Bashai Tudu" epitomizes the characteristics of liminality. I contend that identity, ambiguity, instability, borderzones and their inter-relation form the core value of the text, uncovering the *entre-deux* of existence in midst of social turmoil. The paper seeks to explain, through Devi's work, the results of transgressing threshold of normative duality, along with the significance of symbolic-rites and imaginary landscapes.

Keywords:liminality; counter-narrative; revolution; passage; transgression

Post-Independence India became a promising dream of prosperity and upliftment, but that didn't make it immune to violence and complications. A number of internal revolutions came to forefront of the newly established country, often developed by those who had been marginalized by the status-quo. It was within this context of confrontation that Mahasweta Devi chose to write, questioning the very nature of national historiography and identity. Devi was one of Bengal's leading literary figures known for "subvert[ing] the grand narratives of colonialism, patriarchy, caste system and class division" (Talwar 219), giving space in her works to those rendered voiceless and invisible. Her works are often characterized by hybridity, a fusion of different genres: documentary realism and revolutionary fantasy, political thriller and fragmented narration, mythical reinterpretation or even myth formation.

Though extensive criticisms on wide range of topics are available on her works, I want to offer an alternative view of her novelette "Operation? Bashai Tudu", by building upon the existing readings and exploring the innate liminality present in her narrative. In my contention the work is characterized by recurrent 'liminal' zones, periods and experiences whose analysis will help us to understand the underlying context of the tale.

Bjorn Thomassen defines liminality "as moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction" (1). The concept of 'liminality' was brought to forefront by Arnold van Gennep's seminal book *Les Rites de Passage*. Victor Turner further developed and expanded Gennep's ideas bringing it popular acclaim.

The theme of liminality is present in many ways in the novella. The genre, the thematic aspect, the characters's predicament and the story's setting, each of these facets are deeply liminal in nature. In form, "Operation? Bashai Tudu" mediates between two poles, historical fact and imagined fiction, what Spivak phrases as "history imagined into fiction" (*Breast Strories* 77). While examining the presence of myth in Devi's fiction, Subha Chakravorty Dasgupta observes that "past continues to pervade present" (203). This past gives a 'rational' historical context for the 'fantastical' events unfolding in the present. Thus we have Bashai's tale interrupted with several long historical accounts of systemic exploitation and neglect that

became the background of the peasants' revolt, making the text move into a liminal zone of unstable generic classification.

Devi's narrative often discusses transgression and defiance as a powerfully symbolic and multivalent locus. "Operation? Bashai Tudu" explores the liminal spatio-temporal reality of tribal peasant's revolt in Bengal. Far from the dominant record of both colonial and nationalistic historical account, Devi creates an alternative 'historical fiction' about the marginalized tribal community. The space occupied by titular character becomes a space of intrigue and tension, dancing between the real and imaginary, the here and now and the not yet established. In the authorial preface to *Bashai Tudu*, Devi writes, "The long history of peasant insurgency in India…has shown up, time and again, the nature of the exploitation that has been the fate of the peasants" (xix).

Her fiction often focuses upon, what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls, "a space in the new nation that cannot share in the energy of this [colonization-decolonization] reversal" (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 78). This space is generally associated with the subaltern, and it is here, where the problematic aspects of India's 'unity in diversity' are visible, creating slippages through the 'grand narrative'. These slippages are possible due to the menacing presence of tribals, no matter how invisible they might be rendered; their ability to raise voice is enabled through the liminal possibilities lying in borders. These borders end up becoming threshold, where transgression deterritorialises the status-quo, turning boundary into a site of transgressivity, a point of entry. According to Bjorn Thomassen, "spatial and geographical progression correlates with the ritual marking of a cultural passage" (91). This liminal passage allowed Devi to frame the tale of Bashai Tudu, a tribal leader leading revolution and fighting for land rights, paving way to an alternative cultural story. Bashai's tale constructs a mythic realm in which geographical location is indicative of social function and psychological state. Alaknanda Bagchi suggests that "working within this space of displacement" (42) Devi tries to ""write in" the history of the dispossessed, the disinherited, and the displaced *adivasis*…who have been almost "written out" of Indian history" (42). Sunil Khilnani explains that India's emergence as a Nation State was vital in breaking free of colonial domination, but in this process of nation-building the champions of India's official ideology of nationalism failed to acknowledge "the contours of their own history, in particular the depth of divisions…[whose] distortion in turn obscured the history they were making…a history replete with internal complexities…was [eventually] airbrushed to create the origin myth" (Khilnani 1:57). This language of nationalism wiped out 'regional differences' under the logo of 'National Unification', suppressing the heteroglossia of multiple speeches. The dominant language thus

became 'deaf' to the voice of those beyond the 'national integration', evening out the discourse due to lack of recognition for perspectives beyond the authoritative frame, thereby constructing a sense of national 'we' by suppressing distinctions and enforcing opposition against a perpetual 'other' built into the system as a basis for conformity. Therefore, we can see Bashai Tudu's saga as a process of indigenous decolonization. Devi creates a contemporary *adivasi*myth that contests and reframes dominant narratives about tribal community; forges alternative history and takes a critical stance against mainstream assumptions. Using independent intellectual and spiritual practices ("Santali Wisdom"), the 'threat' of Bashai Tudu forces the nation to reconstruct its social memory.

The "space of the displacement of the colonization-decolonization reversal" (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 78), occupied by Bashai and his "army of the landless tribal agricultural labourers and the migrant labourers" (Devi 12), lies 'in-between' the authority's dominion and imposed subordination. Alaknanda Bagchi describes this binary brilliantly, "On the one hand, in the space of dominance, the oppressive reign of the *Jotedars*...sanctioned and supported by government...On the other hand, in the space of subordination, we have in *Bashai Tudu* the portrayal of gross discrimination, casteism, poverty and deprivation" (44).

This is how the fantastical story of Bashai Tudu emerges: crippled with years of discrimination, unfulfilled government promises, acute poverty and constant institutional exploitation, the tribal community enters a permanent state of ambiguity. An example of systemic oppression could be seen in the following instance:

> The police had made it a practice of raiding [Charsha] from time to time...The village had the look of a cremation ground. The very name 'Charsha' was enough to hold the Block Development Officer back from giving paddy seeds. The village was denied any aid from the government during drought and famine. The landlords were free to cheat the villagers... (Devi 6).

"Liminality gains geopolitical traction when the liminal zone, the spatio-temporal site of passage, is occupied on a more than-temporary basis and when the passage becomes a permanent state of existence" (Downey et al. 11). Here, the dissolution of individual, communal, and collective livelihoods and identities of tribals, not to mention the loss of lives, force them to live in constant state of 'liminality'. It comes as no surprise that this community creates a hero in Bashai, whose identity and actions function as counter-narrative.

The story starts with Mato Dome informing the police about Bashai Tudu's whereabouts. Mato, a tribal himself has been "driven away from the village Charsa" (Devi 1)

due to his decision to "[enroll] as a recruit" (1). He lives in the boundary (nor inside neither outside the status quo), unable to make/achieve a 'common ground': literally and metaphorically. His predicament can be seen in the light of Arnold van Gennep's concept of the sacred rites of passage—or the symbolic and/or spatial act of transitioning between one socially sanctioned position or state to another by way of certain sacred rites. Such rites are required, Thomassen explains, as moving in and out of spaces could be both dangerous and contaminating (12). Since Dome's 'transition' has not been socially sanctioned by symbolic rites, Dome gets struck in the phase of 'in-between'. Siegfried Kracauer suggests that "A constant effort is needed on the part of those inhabiting [the intermediatary place] to meet the conflicting necessities with which they are faced at every turn of the road" (216). Same can be seen in case of Dome, who tries to negotiate in both the world, yet is unable to fully inhabit either. In contrast, Bashai Tudu is able to remain comfortably in border-zone joining the two sides in productive ambiguity, because of being socially sanctioned by symbolic rites.

Bashai Tudu, by virtue of his engagement in the political scene, becomes the '*Top Priority*' for the authority. Bashai's actions become a hurdle in maintaining India's "*image* abroad as a non-violent state" (Devi 102). It is, more precisely, his liminal existence, fluctuating between life and death, making spectacle of mortality and therefore living at the edge of limits that threatens to dissociate power. Devi creates an aura of mystery and myth around him, solidifying his presence in a 'third-space' like a nightmarish vision of the return of the repressed. As the supernatural myth of the immortal Bashai starts to spread, authority and its puppets start quailing from "superstitious fear[s]". Strange events get reported. Out of forty-one corpses enumerated after 'Operation Bakuli', three corpses behave in "quite uncorpselike" (Devi 126) manner: one tries to cut the throat of a sepoy with a sickle and other two goes missing. Following these events the Sub-Inspector begins to feel the menace of Bashai, especially more so as "no SI survives an *action* against him" (11), after all how could "a puny mortal dare to hope to eliminate this offspring of the indestructible breed of the Raktabeeja demons?" (11). Like the *asur*Raktabeeja, Bashai is impossible to 'eliminate': one dies only to give way to multiples like him. Bjorn Thomassen argues, in the light of modernity's fear towards liminality's potential of transformation, that "the modern world is somehow a 'carnival', a grotesque, never-ending comedy, in which 'limit-experiences' turn into norm, a frenzy that never really cools down" (11). The cat & mouse game between 'pulooce' and Bashai is the epitome of limit experience which has become normalized by repetition, justifying the inherent savagery: "*Search and Destroy, Apprehension and Elimination,* and *Shoot to Kill"* (Devi 9). "This repetitive sign of violence and defiance inscribed in thin air becomes

Bashai's/Mahasweta's *writ* of nation upsetting the linear, holistic account of cohesiveness and solidarity" (Bagchi 47). Hence, behind the image of homogenous nation-state is a fragmented country of vanquished communities.

Bashai's relationship with language is also a case of hybridity. His counter-narrative (actions) alters the signification of signs in many ways. Firstly, we see the Sub-Inspector of the Jagula Police Station associating 'paddy' with Bashai instead of "something...motherly" (Devi 10). Associating Bashai with the very word 'paddy' plays out the paradox of unending semiosis where the representamen/signifier generates more signs, which then lead to more signs, and so on infinitely: like a maze of "many Bashais" (10). Secondly, the appropriation of his name by other people after his death breaks the barrier of arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, lending it a socio-political connotation. These are essentially possible due to Bashai's transcendental position beyond the space and place of surveillance and system.

Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan distinguished place and space by positing the former as an enclosed site but that of security and the latter as an open zone of freedom (3). Bashai's mode of existence can be evaluated through this binary. He is not limited to 'place' by virtue of constantly being in flux. Although this limits his prospect of stability it allows him to get the freedom of 'space' where he can not only 'hide his body' but also 'change/exchange his body'. Bashai even embodies the contradictory essence of 'space'. He could be both liberating and threatening at the same time: the former for his fellow peasants and latter for the established norm. In fact, Bashai exists beyond boundaries, even beyond the boundaries of death itself, transforming himself into a mythic character thereby embodying the essence of liminality.

Tuan asserts that a place comes into being through '*pause*': "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (6).The existence of limits and demarcating lines in space creates boundaries of place. But Bashai cannot afford to be within boundary since it is systematically controlled. Yet each time he 'resurrects' to fight for the tribal peasants, he has to get inside 'place' in order to come in contact with the people within it. Perhaps this is the reason that Bashai either dies or gets mortally wounded within this limited boundary of 'place'. This brings another necessity of 'space': not only it sustains and hides Bashai but also helps him to revive his body after each death. Unlike the closed space or place given form by its perceived limits, the (liminal) space is one of "opening, unfolding, or becoming" (Tally Jr. xi). This quality of space allows its inhabitants to remain in the 'process of being', restoring life continuously. Bashai is thus struck on the procedure of becoming again and again. Indeed, this

is the reason why he is able to come back to life after reaching the limit experience (death). His ability to preside at the threshold (between the established and peripheral section) gives him the power/capacity to violate boundaries.

"Liminality signifies a threshold between two zones, an anteroom distinct from that which could be said to be definitely inside or outside, here and there" (Tally Jr. xii): Bashai in this sense lives neither here nor hereafter. Bjorn Thomassen has noted that liminality "involves a potentially *unlimited freedom* from any kind of structure" (1): for our protagonist freedom even from death. For Bashai, it is inside the 'hyper-real' space of liminality that structures cease to exist. The limitation of geographical spatial dynamics and the difficulty of anticipation (emotional, spiritual and metaphysical) posited by Bashai's 'threat' becomes "Top priority" for the State. He is incomprehensible in dominant language, 'beyond' the understanding of rationale. Bashai is associated with "a description that would fit so many…" (Devi 12) remains unidentifiable among the similar-looking crowd of adivasis. His existence (appearance and identity) therefore becomes a panorama of multiplicities. His ability to transcendent 'fixed' reality is what makes liminality a perfect concept to visualize and understand, his 'situation'.

van Gennep posited that socio-symbolic events are preconditioned with the spatial and/or symbolic passage of the individual from one state and/or space of existence into another; and that the essential purpose of these rituals is to enable the individual involved to "pass from one definite position to another which is equally well-defined" (van Gennep 3). In case of funeral, those in mourning are caught in the intermedial position between life and death, as concluded by the uncanny presence of the corpse. Downey et al., in light of van Gennep's theory, elucidates that liminality is disorientating; as the mourners enter into and pass through the mourning period assuming new structural and relational identities to the deceased, the limits of identity (personal and social) and the borders of space and/or time dissolve (7). Since liminal periods lack categorization, there lie endless possibilities for the formation of new identity and relationship. In "Operation? Bashai Tudu" the tribals' readjustment of their relational identities to Bashai is one step ahead. Theirs is a ceremony of mourning and celebration together, joining the "identification parade" (Devi 158). They not only accept the 'non-existence' of previous Bashai but also accept the 'coming into existence' of a new Bashai, where socially sanctioned symbolic rites allow them to bestow identity and responsibility from one person to another, thereby readjusting their relational identity again. Liminality thus becomes a site of invention and creativity where new and reconstructed identity is given approval. The 'new' Bashai builds up his new identity over the existing one (occupying double sphere and living the liminality) within the new symbolic-spatial space.

"Each successor of Bashai in the game of doubling is not Bashai and yet is Bashai, is different and yet the same" (Bagchi 47). Here again the strict boundary of identity and subjectivity is challenged and trespassed, creating clone like multiplicities. Then there's System who is all over again involved "on the issue of Bashai Tudu's repeated deaths, resurrections, *actions*, and identifications" (Devi 158), closing and opening files and going through the same ritual of stamping Bashai as dead only to find him *in action* again.

Turner, establishing upon van Gennep's ideas, considers the liminal figure, who is now marginalised, to be "pass[ing] through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 94), before she/he is re-aggregated or reincorporated within a "relatively stable state once more…[with the] rights and obligations…[with regard to] others of a clearly defined and "structural" type" (Turner 95). After the death of first 'Bashai Tudu', each one that comes after him never truly enters the structured realm. This is partly because of his hybrid identity and partly because of the unfixed and destructured state of the whole tribal community. The displacement and subjugation of the *adivasis*by the capitalistic ventures imposed via imperial culture followed by the post-independence exploitation had direct and adverse effect upon stability and identity of the community. Devi has time and again analyzed their indigenous past prior to Aryan invasion when their marginalization began, followed by the effect of British imperialist project of 'decoding and recoding' causing a breakdown of their non-capitalist mode of living. Within this marginal world Devi shows an emerging community (struck in the liminal phase), ready to ask for accountability. Providing an alternative history and identity unacknowledged by establishment, Devi explores the doctrinaire abuse of past and present. Her narrative provides the tribals with a socio-cultural act of their own thereby forging a contemporary mytho-fantastic tale of their own.

One of the most prominent sites of liminality is the forest where Bashai and Kali Santra meet. It is no coincidence that the crossing of the river (in order to reach the forest) is symbolically similar to the process of boundary transgression. Beyond the reach of ascertainable and familiarity lays forest as an unexplored and unmapped region: a forbidden zone of transition. But for a community existing in bewilderment and disorientation, this forest becomes a site of nurture and divine sanctum: invigorative in itself, especially more so for their ability to implement self-sufficient ecosystem. It is well known that in mythologies across different cultures portrays forests as a scared entity, serving as a link between mankind and the other-worldly. Devi places this as a back drop for interaction between insider (Santra) and outsider (Bashai), making it a site of liminal coexistence.

Yet Santra's placement is not simple either. His is the predicament of revolutionary *bhadralok:* subversive yet within the domain of the dominant. He harbours sympathy for Bashai's cause, supports and dreams of a harmonious community but is unable to do anything actively and remains almost an indecisive character, marked and brought down by failures. Though he plays an important role in mythologizing Bashai by identifying the latter's dead body again and again. Yet his passivity is pointed out by the narrator as: "Kali Santra, you've been sitting idly for too long" (Devi 164). Nonetheless, his last effort to save and warn Bashai shows him transgressing boundary and identity of a '*bhadralok*revolutionary'. Overall, his dubious position puts him in the likes of Mato Dome, neither here nor there, ostracized by family and community, disturbingly in the midst without any socially assigned status. After all, he too becomes enmeshed in the undoing (and its reversal) of a marginalized community.

"To think with liminality very basically means to realize that human life is organized between the limit and the limitless" (Thomassen 11). Characters, places and situations, all occupy liminal zone in this story, hovering somewhere in-between of defined category. Being a tale of disentanglement and transformation, it thus encapsulates the inherent *entre-deux* present in both sides of 'passage' to another reality. Since liminality allows emergent categories and norms to be formed, Devi uses it to forge a hero, a community, whose predicament shows the situation of postcolonial subaltern.

Conclusions

It must be noted that the novella does not end with any specific conclusion, hinting towards the continuity of the same cycle. Bashai remains incomprehensible. Bashai remains free. Every realmhe occupies starts to "hurt like some incurable sepsis" (Devi 9). His elimination becomes an emergency. Though endless efforts "to write Bashai off" (47) are attempted, he exists as a mere speculation. The problem is that there just seems to be "too many truths" (48). Cunningly, Bashai tricks administration in their own game by playing with their orderly records and measured actions. He survives in the gap and this gap between Bashai and his pursuer makes his revolt and this story plausible, bringing forth the hidden space of friction between exploitation and privilege. Liminality exists in between the binary of structural inequality and excess; so do Bashai and his gang of *Santals.* Liminality as a paradigm recognizes the value of borderlands, instability, disorder, heteroglossia, carnivalesque and genesis. All these factors remain a precondition to Bashai's insurgence against prevalent structure. He and his community exists in a perennial borderland; instability and disorder gains permanence in presence of Bashai, who seems to "one of those omniscient creatures from

science fiction" (56); heteroglossia becomes evident as Devi gives voice and visibility to that spatio-temporal narrative which always remain devoid of any presence or identification in mainstream discourse; carnivalesque is the hideous death parade behind the banner of 'counter attack'; and genesis happens in the spectacular yet undisputed case of Bashai's reincarnation of continuing "the same ritual" (171). As a powerful statement against the nexus of power and hegemony, Devi's tale is an account of possibilities hidden in liminality.

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