

André Brink's *The Rights of Desire*: Modernized Apartheid and the Inaudibility Of Liminal Voices under Repressive Surveillance

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore liminality in the lives of the post-apartheid ethnicities through Brink's The Rights of Desire. Victor Turner's theory of liminality will be used to enumerate liminal beings and situations. We endeavor to find out how Brink portrays ethnicities in regard to the existing liminal spaces. Ethnicities share a common pain which is the very truth of being a minority. Brink's narrative exemplifies the enmeshed characters within the sociopolitical whirlwind that has thrown the minorities off balance. The present paper comes up with this conclusion that although liminality is supposed to be a temporary phase, it has become an integral component of South Africa and its ethnicities. The seed of apartheid is that deeply planted. It demands a long time for its roots to be perished. Apartheid has just been modernized and not devastated. Consequently, post-apartheid South Africa just like apartheid becomes a communitas or an anti-structured entity in which the political transition of power in 1994 does not change anything in regard to the lives of its ethnicities.

Keywords: André Brink, Apartheid, Ethnicities, In-betweenness, Liminality, Post-Apartheid, Transition.

1. Introduction

As long as the cornerstones of the ideology remain intact—Group Areas, including the splintering of the country into a chequered map of 'homelands' and a staggering program of resettlement; separate education systems; the 'Immorality' Act; an entire economy based on exploitation —apartheid will persist. What we have seen in recent years has been a modernizing, a sophistication of the system; by no means a development towards its radical destruction. (Brink, 1983, p. 91)

This paper endeavors to utterly scrutinize the post-apartheid liminal psyches and spaces as they have been fictionalized by André Brink to determine if the political transition of power in 1994 in South Africa has helped the improvement of ethnicities' lives or not. *The Rights of Desire* relates the life of Ruben Olivier, an antedated retired librarian who is concerned with his subjectivity in the post-apartheid South Africa. He is an outsider rather than a full citizen within a country which has made him what he is. The boundaries between past and present undergo erosion by the existence of a creature from the past, Antje, in the present context of South Africa. Ruben, an Afrikaner inhabits in the same place that Magrieta, a colored housekeeper, and Antje, a colored ghost and the victim of slavery and apartheid, live.

In terms of what we have discussed so far, we need to demonstrate the way Brink represents the situation of South Africa's ethnic groups through liminality. Therefore, an exclusive investigation of the concept of liminality will be of use here. Historically, the concept of liminality was introduced by the French ethnographer and folklorist, Arnold Van Gennep (1873-1957) in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). Almost half a century later, in 1960, this book was translated into English as *The Rites of Passage*. Reading the English version was highly influential in forming the basis of the concept of liminality for Victor Turner.

Turner (1979) postulates that "Liminality is not confined in its expression to ritual and the performative arts" (p. 466). Turner's ideas are not just restricted to ritual societies; in addition, contexts other than ritual ones could be examined in terms of liminality as his major theory. For Turner, the two aspects of society are "structure and liminality" (Turner, 1985, p.11). Subsequently, there might be no structure and hierarchy in the liminal phase since it is contrasted to structure. That is why Turner describes liminality "as the means of generating variability and the free play of humanities cognitive and imaginative capacities" (ibid, p. 14).

For Turner, the essence of liminality is a "release from normal constraints" (1985, p. 160). Liminality means to be "free from the pragmatics of the commonsense world" (p. 161). Socio-cultural liminality provides conditions for "criticism" (ibid, p. 170). In other words, in liminality one can comment on and criticize the society (Turner, 1979, p. 467). Liminality is a "definite stage in the passage of an initiand from status A to status B" (Turner, 1985, p. 160). In the way indicated, liminality "must bear some traces of its antecedent and subsequent stages" (ibid). Subsequently, a liminal being occupies neither the A position nor the B one. The liminal beings share the characteristics of both A and B, and they are a combination of both the features of the antecedent and the subsequent stages.

Liminal human beings are "stripped of status role characteristics" (Turner, 1979, p. 471). It is asserted that "the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous;" that is to say, "liminal entities are neither here nor there, and they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial." These liminal beings "have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role in a kinship system." the liminal beings acquire a "uniform condition." They are "passive" in that they are not allowed to "complain" (Turner, 1995, p. 95). During liminal times reversal occurs in the status of beings, to put it another way, "Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low" (Turner, 1995, p. 97). Although Turner focuses on tribal societies, his theories are applicable to non-tribal societies as well.

Liminal beings are not categorized in a particular group. In this respect they are called polluting creatures. Liminality is structureless, it lacks a kind of hierarchy. This is the anti-structurality of liminality that Turner calls *communitas*. There is no social class or role within *communitas*. *Communitas* is the opposite of *societas* in which there is complete order and structure. In *societas*, the community is not suffering from chaos. Liminality and *communitas* are a state of indeterminacy which could be promising and threatening, constructive and destructive. Liminal beings are like androgynous persons who could be classified neither as a male nor a female. Furthermore, Turner's concept of liminality as an anthropologist provides us with a profitable tool in deploying character analysis. Distinguishing the properties of liminality and those of a structured system, Turner (1995) offers the following binary oppositions. The first word in each of the following pairs is counted as a characteristic of liminality:

Totality/partiality
Homogeneity/heterogeneity
Communitas/structure
Equality/inequality
Anonymity/systems of nomenclature
Absence of property/property
Absence of status/status
Nakedness or uniform clothing/distinctions of clothing
Sexual continence/sexuality
Minimization of sex distinctions/maximization of sex distinctions
Absence of rank/distinctions of rank
Humility/just pride of position
Disregard for personal appearance/care for personal appearance
No distinctions of wealth/distinctions of wealth
Unselfishness/selfishness
Total obedience/obedience only to superior rank
Sacredness/secularity
Sacred instruction/technical knowledge
Silence/speech
Suspension of kinship rights and obligations/kinship rights and obligations
Continuous reference to mystical powers/intermittent reference to mystical powers
Foolishness/sagacity
Liminality and Communitas
Simplicity/complexity
Acceptance of pain and suffering/avoidance of pain and suffering
Heteronomy/degrees of autonomy (pp. 106-107)

Liminality in locations and spaces are of a high significance in the present research. Accordingly, tangible instances for all of the characteristics of liminality and their definitions will be offered throughout this paper.

2. Discussion and Analysis

Attwell and Harlow's study (as cited in Kossew, 2003) offers that Brink's *The Rights of Desire* is concerned with the "refashioning of identities caught between stasis and change" (p. 155). The oscillation between these two polarities suspends the subject in achieving a unified and coherent identity. It is acknowledged that the post-apartheid era is a period marked with "collision between private and public worlds; intellect and body; desire and love; and public disgrace or shame; and the idea of individual grace or salvation" (Kossew, 2003, p. 155). Henceforth, these collisions generate a kind of liminality between the two binary oppositions. The subjects are fragmented between the two polarities.

Turner (1985) points out that the socio-cultural liminality provides conditions for "reflection, criticism, rapid socialization, the postulation of variant models of and for conduct and social organization, and the reformulation of cosmologies religious and scientific" (p. 170). Subsequently, such a liminal circumstance supplies the characters with the opportunity to criticize and offer their ideas regarding the social situation of the life in South Africa. Such criticisms and reflections reverberate through the conversations of the characters. For instance, Ruben maintains that the world is shrinking and is going to pieces. It is not a safe place any longer.

Jolly (1996) asserts the legacy left by apartheid to generations of blacks "will continue to have an impact long into the post-apartheid future" (p. 151). Therefore, the transition does not change the essence of liminality for ethnicities. Unfolding the situation of South Africa, Suttner (2006) displays that "the ship of state is leaking and it may still sail on in a halting manner. It is in a liminal state between sinking and sailing-indefinitely" (p. 40). It is elucidating the very liminal situation of South Africa.

The house in which Ruben inhabits, is an old one and stands as the legacy of the history. "The house is falling apart; it's getting darker and gloomier every year.... It's a wilderness" (p. 4-5). Ruben's son describes their own situation as a "dead-end" (p. 25). Talking about Antje with Magrieta, Ruben offers that Antje has lived about three hundred years ago. Magrieta replies that "En she still see the same things happening what happened in her time" (p. 248). It demonstrates the monotony and the lack of a fertile change in the situation of South Africa. Ruben acknowledges that "Ghosts are supposed to wander about because they still have unfinished business in this world" (p. 250). The ghost of Antje represents all of the wandering ethnicities who have not fulfilled their rights within South Africa.

Speculating on the significance of ending and storytelling, Ruben notes: "Poor Antje on her never-ending cryptic passage ... to keep her story going. What happens when Magrieta and Tessa and I are no longer there to listen to her? And what happens to my own story?" (p. 256). Due to the invisibility of liminal beings, their stories will be inaudible as well. Antje is wandering to narrate her story whereas no one is that much interested in hearing her story, although all of the ethnicities have stories to narrate, there is no enthusiastic listener.

Going into the basement to search for a lost ring, Ruben states that "I wrapped myself in *grey sheets of cobwebs and gritty dust*" (p. 234; my italics). Grey is a color between black and white. Luscher (1971) focuses on the psychological exploration of the grey color:

A neutral grey, containing no color at all and therefore free from any affective influence, while its intensity places it halfway between light and dark so that it gives rise to no anabolic nor catabolic effect- it is psychologically and physiologically neutral. (p. 26)

Ruben who is designated with gray color could be called a liminal being. Being deprived of the library in which Ruben had access to many worlds resembles imprisonment. Ruben describes the library in the following way:

My library was _ all libraries are _ a place of ultimate refuge, a wild and sacred space where meanings are manageable precisely because they aren't binding; and where illusion is comfortably real. To read, to think, to trace the words back to their origins real or presumed; to invent; to dare to imagine.... Transport is the business of books, the purpose of my world-without-end. (p. 32)

Language which constitutes words "is a meeting place, a point of confrontation between the individual and the social" (Brink, 1983, p. 232). Language provides Ruben with the opportunity to interact in the society; whereas being deprived of it puts him in a liminal state that is suspended between the private domain (self) and the public one (society). On the contrary, words put Ruben on the hold to achieve the real, in that language as the symbolic, prevents the achievement of the real. Accordingly, words are liminal by themselves in that they can both connect and disconnect an individual to its surroundings. Ruben alleges that "words do interpose themselves between the world and us; they make us realize how, literally, 'out of touch' we are with the real" (p. 114). The consequence of such a contradictory function marks him as a liminal being. Being detached from the library, as the world of words, Ruben is entertaining himself by his

interaction with the limited number of women around him. According to Turner (1985), "entertainment" is a term which literally means "holding between," or "liminalizing" (p. 168). His entertainment represents him as a liminal subject.

Ruben clarifies that "I'd had this strange feeling of being disembodied ...of having died myself, of surviving in limbo.... Started wandering aimlessly through the labyrinth of the old house" (p. 74). His life in general and the library in particular resembles a labyrinth. Klapcsik (2012) describes labyrinth as "a barrier between the known and the unknown" (p. 107). In such a situation, one finds himself/ herself lost in the warp of time and difficulties. The individual cannot find the paths of entrance and exit. The whole novel becomes a quest for desire; the very reason of the lack could be traced back to his job loss. His desires are deferred, suspended and put on hold. Desire as a common motif in the novel is directly associated with liminality. Desire is on constant oscillation between denial and fulfillment, it does not contain anything in itself because containing may foreshadow "the possibilities of fulfillment" which is the end of desire (p. 154). Pack equates void with liminal spaces (p. 75). Desire resembles a vacuum, a void, a chasm, a breach or a hole which do not contain anything.

Ruben thinks that the past is his only future (p. 81). There is a pocket watch among Magrieta's belongings which has stopped working from several years ago. It symbolizes the lack of progress from a temporal viewpoint. In liminal spaces time gives a "hiccup" (Brink, 1991, p. 105). It seems as if time has been frozen within the past and the human beings are fossilized in the same context. The present is a negation of itself. Turner illuminates that "liminal time is not controlled by the clock" (Turner, 1979, p. 465). They are enmeshed within timeless time frames.

Being asked by his daughter-in-law to leave the house to go abroad and join them, Ruben replies "I'm not living on my own. I have my ghost to look after me when Magrieta is not here" (p. 5). It is an irony for he is an existent being who seeks support from the ghost, a semi-existent entity. Ghosts themselves are liminal beings. They are really ambiguous, "betwixt and between" creatures (Turner, 1985, p. 180). They blur the boundaries between life and death. Since they could not be categorized, they do not follow the rules pertinent to hierarchy. Bhabha states that "[l]iminal space, in-between the designations of identity... opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (p. 4). By the same token, they make us conscious of the very anti-structrality and the lack of hierarchy which is the characteristic of such liminal creatures.

Turner (1985) elaborates on Shakespeare's Hamlet and points to the fact that the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost represents that something has been rotten in the state of Denmark (p. 232). Correspondingly, the ghost of Antje is indicative of something rotten in the state of South Africa. She is the victim of social conflict and racial injustice. According to Turner (1966), "when a ritual situation immediately succeeds a political situation, the contentious issues raised in the former are kept in abeyance in the latter phase in the social process; the dispute may again attain public status in a new political situation" (p. 240). Consequently, 1994 free elections, seems to be a ritual situation that keeps the previously established rules in abeyance to utilize it in the later superficially changed government.

The ghost of Antje is the same subject that undergoes a ritual situation. Besides being a hybrid regarding her mixed race, she is a hybrid that symbolizes the ideologies of the past that have been kept in abeyance temporarily, but manifest themselves within the present time. Such a transition and liminal era suspends the dominant political essence of a period just to be brought into practice in a later era. The 1994 transition is a superficially ritualistic transition rather than a politically well-defined and affective one.

Colored characters in the novel like Magrieta and Antje have not been categorized in the social dichotomies. The liminality in Magrieta's situation is clarified through the following manifestation, "*If she'd been too black for the old government, who'd thrown her out of District Six, she now turned out to be not quite black enough for the new people in power*" (p. 89, my italics). Turner (1987) defines liminal personae as twofold characters: "they are at once no longer classified and not yet classified" (p. 6). They occupy a liminal zone; they are mixed ethnicities whose position is "a site of racial convergence" (Lourens, 2009 p. 54).

Hybrid ethnicities are inhabiting "between the cracks" (ibid, p. 58). Regarding the situation of the coloreds in South Africa, Bhabha propounds the term "displacement." To the same extent, Magrieta is a displaced ethnic group who cannot be attached to either sides of a category. She is a 'halfway between ...being not defined' human being (p. 13). She lacks a definition: "... the colored South African subject represents a hybridity, a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality" (ibid). Magrieta's house is destroyed by bulldozers in District Six. As a result, she is deprived of her property. Turner (1995) identifies "absence of property" as one of the properties of liminality (p. 106).

Music plays a significant role in this novel. MacFarlane, Ruben's friend, illustrates that "music is the most overrated noise in the universe" (p. 11). It is a general reference to the temporary release of all human beings from the harsh realities of their universe. The significant point is that almost all of the characters in the Brink's novels are into music. Brink (1978) offers that listening to music is "the *only pure form of escape*" (p. 122). Turner (1995) exemplifies "silence" as a characteristic of liminality (p. 106). Accordingly, the demand to play and hear music signifies their attempt to escape

the world of silence. After the end of the played music, the person reintegrates into the previous and the very harsh reality of life. Music throws the listener into a kind of seclusion which is a characteristic of liminal beings. Kristeva (1986) refers to "the language system as a genotext and the signifying system as...a phenotext" (p. 28). Subsequently, geno-text is associated with the language stage or symbolic in Lacan whereas pheno-text is associated with pre-language stage or semiotic.

The unification between the mother and the child is disrupted by the presence of father which indicates a realm of rules and laws. Comparing the desire to be attached to one's own mother with the desire of ethnicities to be attached to their country, music portrays a significant role in the transition. Accordingly, the light or speechless music as a liminal means brings the geno-text into the domain of the pheno-text. In other words it takes the listener back to the semiotic stage in which the individual could be utterly free from the domain of language and rules. The listener feels a temporary "re-integration" into the not-yet detached world of his mother or his country. Government like the father is the generator of law. The created gap is temporarily bridged by music in that it helps the listener to forget his detachment temporarily. As a result, music creates a temporary liminal space to forget a larger and somehow more destructive liminality. Sound becomes necessary that is why Tessa carries a guitar, although broken and completely unused, with herself to every new place in which she becomes a lodger. It is the instrument to produce sound to escape from the silent world of liminal beings. Sound becomes necessary.

Beach appears in the novel as another element which represents liminality. Beach itself is a liminal space, "It's a space suspended between land and sea, a connective tissue between two worlds;" it is a space of both relaxation and anxiety, a "...place to retreat from the turmoil of life and threat; unpredictable currents and disturbances may occur there" (Preston-Whyte, 2004 352-p. 354). Ruben and Tessa are on the beach; the tide covers them and through it the boundary between the land and the sea vaporizes. It propounds that liminal beings occupy liminal spaces.

The liminal beings are under complete surveillance in *The Rights of Desire*. Referring to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we can assert that "Big Brothers" are always watching. The ghost of Antje plays the role of an observer. She sees and reports everything; she is a present non-existent being. The characters become objects of gaze. This surveillance abandons the characters in a liminal situation in that it leaves them in a suspended state, between their real selves and constructed ones or personas. They may restrain from doing what they desire just because of being watched. Antje represents the State as a Repressive Apparatus in the Althusserian sense of the concept.

Turner (1995) explores "equality" as a property of liminal beings (p. 106). Sympathizing with her, Tessa offers "we're *all* fucked up in this country, aren't we?" (p. 86; my italics). The word *all* indicates the equality in the situation of all of the ethnicities. Turner (1979) offers the term "collective crisis" (p. 466) and attributes it to the time in which the whole society faces a challenge. It is a public crisis through which the society of South Africa as a whole is subjected to agony.

The solutions for their solitude are not permanent. Although Ruben takes Tessa as lodger and companion, his sons argue that a lodger could not be a long-term solution. You have to be looked after on a "permanent basis" (p. 175). It is an impossibility to find a permanent basis in such a loose country; the lodger herself is a detached inhabitant. Moreover, the boundary between being a landlord and a lodger is so fluid that leads to the emergence of the third space. Being recognized as the landlord, Ruben does not have the feeling of belonging to the place himself. He asserts "I'm still a guest. I don't really live here, at most I have haunted it" (p. 197).

Ruben calls himself a stranger in the house and that is quite similar to the way by which the characters in *An Act of Terror* express their feelings for their lack of a sense of belonging after living almost half a century in even a particular house. Ruben postulates his being as an alien to the place. Assimilation of these two contrary feelings leaves him in an in-between feeling of attachment and detachment. Creating a third persona out of him, the socio-political situation marks him with liminality. Going back to the library in which he used to work, Ruben speculates "I belong to a different world now. I am a stranger to the place that has made me what I am" (p. 102). As Bezdoode (2012) has frequently noted in his dissertation, this lack of a sense of belonging has become a motif throughout all of the novels by Brink.

Although in the post-apartheid era some of the pressures upon ethnicities other than whites subside, they are not that significant to catch the eyes of their beholders. Brink (1983) elucidates that in the post-apartheid era, most of the public places like hotels have allowed being occupied by customers other than whites. And the "Whites only" notices have been removed from Post Offices (p. 91). He offers that we should be careful not to interpret such changes "as the dismantling of apartheid" (p. 90-91). Even in the post-apartheid era, apartheid is still on the move. At the end of the novel, Magrieta and Tessa leave the house. Tessa was lodger out of whom no trace of existence has been left. Nothing can prove their existence. Such a situation is applicable to all of the other ethnicities whose very presence could not be proved through their shared and public history. Their existence is doomed to invisibility and insignificance.

3. Conclusion

In *The Rights of Desire* Brink has utilized different approaches in demonstrating liminality in the post-apartheid era. Here is a list of such representing techniques: books, words, language, ghost, hybridity, frozen time, inaudibility of liminal voices, immigrants, entertainment, music, library as a labyrinth of desire, Lacanian concept of the Real, limbo, contradictory feelings and roles, displacement, surveillance, gaze, Althusserian Repressive State Apparatus, lack of a permanent firm base, and lack of a boundary between a landlord and a lodger.

The desire to be accepted in South Africa as full citizens is not met and attachment to South Africa becomes the great Object of desire for its minorities. The attachment is never thoroughly fulfilled; it resembles an unrequited love in that South Africa does not respond to such desires. The unfulfilled desire puts the minorities in a life-long wander and in search of a possibility to incorporate themselves into South Africa. We do not employ the term re-incorporate here in that they have never been incorporated into the so-called their country. Liminal beings do not outgrow their transitional status. Given these facts, post-apartheid becomes a post-traumatic environment. Ethnicities are characters who constitute death and life at the same time; that is why Ruben argues that death has been born with him, their lack of survival is the only completely guaranteed principle of their lives.

Brink in this post-apartheid novel does not show much interest in clarifying the colors of his characters.. He investigates ethnicities in the same context and in association with each other. In most of the cases the problem of one of them is shared by the other characters who are of a different ethnicity. The lack of a clear reference to their colors indicates that they are viewed similarly by the government. The government does not bother itself to make categorization among the so-called invisible ethnicities. Altogether, liminality becomes internal in the post-apartheid era. Liminal city spaces are converted to liminal mental spaces. It demonstrates that apartheid has just been modernized and not devastated. Regarding the lives of ethnicities, the transition of power has not changed anything for the better.

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