

# The Liminality of Contemporary Culture

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I'm going to show them a world without you...a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries. A world...where anything is possible. Where we go from there...is a choice I leave to you.

(The Matrix, 1999)

After these lines of Neo, a character in the semi virtual movie *The Matrix*, I went to my desk to write this paper. The reason is not far to seek. My mind was seeking the possibilities of such world- a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world ...where anything is possible. I saw the modern cultural world as the world of immense possibilities- with conflicts, assimilation and appropriation. A world which has commands, requests and at the same times this world is virtual too. This is the world of machines and humans- the world of cyborgs. A world of life and death, of ambivalence, of cultural identity crash, of hybridity, of doubtful convictions, in short- the world of liminality.

Liminality connotes more than just *in between-ness*. It is a phase that every culture as general and every living human being in particular has to go through. It is the essential need of human nature. It shows the fickleness of our psyche and doubts of our sub consciousness. In my paper I am trying to theorize the liminal through the works of three great theorists of our time. The concept of Donna Haraway's Cyborg, Deleuze and Guattari's *Desiring Machines* and Julia Kristeva's *Abjection* defines the nature of my quest in the area of liminality.

Historically this concept was introduced in 1909 by the ethnologist Arnold van Gennep in his *seminal book The Rites of Passage*, where he refers to a state of 'in between-ness' during cultural and religious rites. Rites of passage are, in short,

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ceremonial acts of a special kind that accompany a person going from one social grouping to another, connected to different phases in life (Van Gennep, 1960:1-3). So, there are ceremonies of birth, puberty, marriage, and so on. Part of such rites is a territorial passage, such as crossing a threshold. According to him, “the passage from one social position to another is identified with a *territorial passage*, such as the entrance into a village or a house, the movement from one room to another, or the crossing of streets and squares” (Van Gennep, 1960:192).

But it was not till Victor Turner that this term got popularity beyond the religious studies. According to Turner (1969:95), “attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.” In this manner, people become outsiders, in a strange way kept at a distance – sometimes literally (Turner, 1967:98) – from ‘the’ social reality.

Another critic Rob Shields introduced his ideas in *Places on the margin* (1991). According to him, such places, where social orders get blurred, are the best locations to discover how cultures present themselves, how they interact with each other, how they influence each other and how one culture dominates the other.

### **Nature of Liminality**

I locate the position of liminal stage quite critical in the construction of any culture. It is just like the model of Sigmund Freud’s unconscious-preconscious-consciousness. At the same level Gennep describes three levels in the rites of passage preliminal-liminal-postliminal.

Here the function of liminal stage encompasses both the stages in Freudian terminology, in other words what liminality does is

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exactly what unconscious and preconscious stages can do to form the identity of a self. The stage of liminality helps to examine one's own self in comparison to others and thus provides the opportunity to see the potentiality of an ego which can remain hidden otherwise. It moves from past to present, from primal culture to civilized culture and puts the clear picture of the self and the culture in front of us. It can create sublimating discourse which is possible at borderlines. As argues the French critic Julia Kristeva:

Owing to the ambiguous opposition I/Other, Inside/Outside—an opposition that is vigorous but pervious, violent but uncertain—there are contents, "normally" unconscious in neurotics, that become explicit if not conscious in "borderline" patients' speeches and behavior. Such contents are often openly manifested through symbolic practices, without by the same token being integrated into the judging consciousness of those particular subjects. Since they make the conscious/unconscious distinction irrelevant, borderline subjects and their speech constitute propitious ground for a sublimating discourse ("aesthetic" or "mystical," etc.), rather than a scientific or rationalist one. (1982, p. 7)

The liminal stage is characterized by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy. One's sense of identity dissolves to some extent bringing about disorientation. It is a period of transition during which the normal limits of thought, self-understanding and behaviors are relaxed, opening the way to something new. It may be a land of recognition for someone at the same time it may be land of oblivion for the others. The nature of liminality, its geographical characteristics and the person who finds himself in such a position can be analyzed best in the following words of Kristeva:

Instead of sounding himself as to his "being," he does so concerning his place: "*Where* am I?" instead of "*Who* am I?" For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories,

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languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the *abject*—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the *deject* is in short a *stray*. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object! attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved.

(1982, p. 8)

### **How Cultures Behave in the Liminal Space?**

Always different cultures collide with each other in the liminal phase and here in this space we find the qualities of both the cultures. When a superior culture clashes with another culture the dyads are formed and ‘nervous condition’ ensues which normally attributes the people of the inferior culture. In cultural construction there are the faultlines through which the marginal cultures speak and represent themselves. Because it is here that the hidden ideologies of the dominant culture is clear to the marginalized culture.

In every culture “there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an *assemblage*” A culture is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity—but we don’t know yet what the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of a substantive. One side of a machinic assemblage faces the strata, which doubtless make it a kind of organism, or signifying totality, or determination attributable to a subject; it also has a side facing a *body without organs*, which is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves

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with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity". (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 4). So we can follow a line of thought which tells us that in the culture there is one side which is open to the past and its failings – BwO (body without organs) and the other side the culture faces the other culture and it leads towards the acculturation as well. If two cultures resist each other forever the liminal phase is not creative but it doesn't mean that resistance is not productive. It is this process of becoming, which helps the cultures to attain the point of sublimity at one level or another. In other words cultures have to encounter each other on a 'plane of consistency' so they can attain the characteristics of becoming. As Kristeva proves this cultural point of sublimation in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* '...the sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy—fascination.'

What does she mean by sublimation in this cultural process is the point of 'narcissistic crisis' of one or the other cultural entities. In the process of active resistance one point comes where one culture drops its self for the sake of the other. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, "subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 18).

The most important change that is an indispensable characteristic of liminality is that of decentralization. There is no dominant, superior or inferior culture any more in this stage once they start to interact with each other. In postcolonial discourse the culture of colonized gets hybrid encountering the culture of colonizers, but in the liminal phase there is no Eurocentricism- both the cultures exchange the good and bad qualities of each other but the element of desiring the other is always there. All we need to do is to have immense faith in our

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original culture and always try to maintain all the basic features of it before encountering the other culture.

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of ordinary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal- that initiate new sings of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (Bhabha, 2009, p. 2).

### **Site of Representation**

For Homi Bhabha, liminality is a place where past and present are united together. Their fusion allows us to see the past through the eyes of future and to learn from it. Living on the border actually allows us to rethink the formative criterion of class, community and identities. Borders are important thresholds, full of contradictions and ambivalence. They both separate and join different places. And by doing so it provides an immense possible site of representation which allows subaltern to speak.

I am reminded of the movie *The Terminal* (2004) where the leading character of the movie Viktor Navorski is detained at airport at a liminal space. Although it is a comedy but just think what happens to the character? He evolves, develops as a human being, learns from a different culture which is not his own, works, earns and at the end finds his love and happily he is allowed to enter his own culture (Krakozhia) through the resisting culture (American). That gate number where he is allowed to stay becomes his site of representation. His past haunts his identity and his present helps him to search his own true self through newness. As Bhabha argues:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and

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present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (2009, p. 10)

Bhabha's vision is a stage of liminality where the self or the communal culture can be seen diversified and progressive. A liminal place or a liminal entity which will be mingling of either or / neither nor. In the last part of my paper I muse over such liminal sites which contextualize the contemporary culture.

### **Liminality of the Contemporary Culture**

Contemporary culture is cyber culture- a culture of simulation and reality, surrounded by machines and gadgets. Robots are a virtual production of human body and question the authority of human mind. In this revolutionary tradition the American critic Donna Haraway defines the concept of Cyborg in her seminal work *Simian, Cyborg, and Woman: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). This is how she defines this liminal fictional entity:

A cyborg is a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine. But, cyborgs are compounded of special kinds of machines and special kinds of organisms appropriate to the late twentieth century. Cyborgs are post-Second World War hybrid entities made of, first ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen 'high-technological' guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled laboring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborg is machines in their guise, also, as communications systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses. (1991; p. 1)

Cyborg is the product of our high culture or in other words hi-tech culture. It is a creation of reality and fiction. *Cyborgs are*

*ether, quintessence.* What is the need and utility of entity like cyborg- a mingling of machine and body? Are there really such entities? By creating the entities like cyborgs or simians what we can do it to challenge the notion of fixity. For Haraway this is the category which actually breaks the grand narratives of western dominance, especially male dominance. I believe that this is where liminality is a key term in postcolonial theoretical discourse also. You can never give full importance to any category or culture, everything here is in the flux. We can question the whole Western *informatics of domination*:

Small Group	Subsystem
Racial chain of being	Neo-imperialism, United Nations Humanism
Public/Private	Cyborg citizenship
Nature/Culture	Fields of Difference
Cooperation	Communications enhancement
Freud	Lacan
Sex	Genetic Engineering
Labour	Robotics
Mind	Artificial intelligence
Second World War	Star Wars

These categories, which Haraway refers in her seminal book, show the changes taking place in our contemporary culture. These also show the need of the entities like cyborgs- a liminal entity. The boundary between human and animal is breached. The self and other-as incorrigible and uncompromising dyads are things of the past. In the contemporary culture, in the era of many voices we find the otherness of other combined in the self. We are thus facing a new boundary, a new liminality of culture- between science fiction and social reality, the in-between-ness or the no man's land inhabited by cyborgs. What is the utility of the entities like cyborgs in our cultural world? Haraway answers:

From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not



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afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. ... Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling. (1991, p. 154)

We all are cyborgs now, Haraway contends, and might as well prepare ourselves for joint kinship with machines and not be afraid of partial identities and contradictory standpoints. Indeed, if we dare enough to take the responsibility to see us in such a liminal entity, we need no longer demonize it, but start reconstructing and renovating our daily life with new challenges and new voices, in connection to others and in harmony to all our parts. She finds the solution of a lot of female problems in the being of cyborg, as she wishes:

Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the super-savers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories. Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. (1991, p. 181)

Like Haraway, the French critics Deleuze and Guattari also compare human body with machine- a desiring machine in their book *Anti-Oedipus*. For him the space of liminality is a space of production. He talks of the identity bracketed within a particular cultural space. Culture in the liminal phase is just like desiring machines- which is binary and ever productive. In other words liminality produces desire of the other culture and vice-versa.

Hence we are all handy men: each with his little machines...Producing-machines                      desiring-machines

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everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever. (2005, p. 2)

The French critic Julia Kristeva also maps out the liminality in human body. She names it abjection- a power of horror. Abjection is neither subject nor object, it is neither here nor there but it is everywhere because it is incorporated in the self until self becomes aware of its presence or absence. The moment it is aware of its presence the sense of repulsion resides on the senses and you start to hate what was once your own. So abject actually resides on the liminal boundary of our body. As she defines it:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects...The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. (1982, p. 1, 8)

For some of the cultural critics the term liminal is quite problematic and tricky. They charge this term with negative feelings of exclusion. I am not unaware that exclusion is one of the characteristics of the process of liminality but this is how cultures are challenged and changed accordingly. Liminality provides enough space to stand outside of the center and challenge the authority as nomads do. Because in this phase the vertical position of authority, which is very much clear in capitalist societies, gives way to horizontal relation of cultures. As a rhizomataical pattern, they encounter each other on the same grounds on a non-hierarchical manner. As nomads they move on the margins to challenge the central authority. What binds them together is the fact that during the liminal stage,

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normally accepted differences between the participants, such as social class, are often de-emphasized or ignored. A social structure of *communitas* forms: one based on common humanity and equality rather than recognized hierarchy.

So while located in our respective cultures we should be aware of the nature of liminality which is running under through. We should see the liminal phase with a site of new possibilities but at the same time we should be aware and alarmed that liminality can never be permanent else it can lead to fractured identities and cultures.

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