Problems with Identity: Navigating Transcultural Memory in Adivasi Societies of India

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Abstract:

Memory and culture share an intricate relationship, where the existence of culture is inconceivable without memory. Both concepts, however, are inherently fluid, constantly evolving. Prevailing discourse in memory studies, linking memory exclusively to specific cultures, faces challenges from the emerging concept of transcultural memory. Advocates of transcultural memory question the stability of cultures, emphasizing the movement of memory across cultural boundaries and exploring the convergence and in-betweenness of memory. Arnold Van Gennep's concept of "Liminal Space," depicting an individual in a state of ambiguity between two worlds, serves as a crucial framework for understanding this intermediary stage of memory. As memory studies evolve, this abstract seeks to expand upon Van Gennep's concept by analyzing the culture, space, and memory of Adivasi societies as represented in the novel *Havan by* Mallikaarjun Hirermath. The novel discusses the Lambada Adivasis and their settlement amidst changing currents of modernization as their village is struck with the transformation into a city. By examining the unique aspects of Adivasi communities, this study challenges the notion of a uniform transcultural memory experience at the convergence of mainstream culture when it comes to Adivasi experience.

This research critically engages with the complexities of transcultural memory, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between memory, culture, and space within Adivasi societies. Through the analysis of their cultural practices, spatial dynamics, and collective memory, this paper aims to establish the distinctiveness of Adivasi communities, thereby contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on transcultural memory studies.

KEYWORDS: Liminal Space, Transcultural Memory, Adivasi Experience, Mainstream

Introduction:

Raymond Williams characterizes culture as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (87-93). The complexity of the definition of culture arises from the multitude of works that engage with it, particularly those originating from Europe. Both Mathew Arnold and T.S. Eliot can be identified as influential cultural critics of their respective eras. Arnold held an elitist perspective on culture, regarding it as a refining agent that provides access to the "best that has been thought and known". (23). He advocated for culture as a means of achieving social harmony and self-improvement, emphasizing the

value of high culture, literature, and intellectual pursuits. Arnold perceived culture as a force capable of morally and intellectually uplifting society and individuals. He argued in favour of nurturing the mind and spirit through exposure to great works of art, literature, and philosophy. Arnold's viewpoint on culture was elitist, placing value on the refined and classical aspects of human achievement. In contrast, T.S. Eliot possessed a more intricate and nuanced understanding of culture. Eliot criticized modern society and its detachment from tradition and spiritual values. He believed that culture should be deeply rooted in an understanding of the past, expressing caution towards rapid societal changes that undermine traditional values. In his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent,* Eliot underscored the significance of tradition in shaping individual creativity. He perceived culture as a living and evolving entity that necessitates constant revitalization through a profound engagement with history (37). Unlike Arnold, Eliot's perspective on culture was not solely elitist; he recognized the importance of popular culture and the need for a balance between tradition and innovation.

Despite their divergent viewpoints, both writers highlighted the role of culture as a definitive embodiment within society. They also emphasized the monolithic notion of culture confined to a particular race, rather than culture as an embodiment that transcends boundaries and encompasses a transcultural place. Raymond Williams' definition challenges all of these interpretations by presenting culture as something ordinary (1958: 2). From the above definitions of culture, it becomes evident that culture has a role to play in the formation of self of an individual. Regardless of ethnicity, each individual is brought in a cultural setting that has a common memory. This possession of culture as a natural element is what Williams means as "ordinary". By the natural association between culture and memory, it becomes impossible to be in a culture without having a memory of its rituals, stories and other similar performances. At this juncture the aspect of cultural memory becomes a very significant phenomenon for the successful existence of a particular culture and without which the culture peeps at a certain end.

Literary Representation of Lambada's in *Havan*:

In the novel Havan, Hiremath records the lives of Lambada Adivasis in their settlement called 'Thanda'. Having spent most of his childhood among members of the society, Hiremath represents the Lambada as a society with a proud history, rich cultural practices, and pious towards the deities. Like many Adivasi narratives, this novel also pictures the community's painful step toward modernization with the destruction done to identity, culture and the community as a whole. The slow erosion of values in the process of development echoes the loss of cultural memory in terms of rituals, stories of the past and remembrance of ancestral figures.

The paper is an attempt to show the problematic aspects of transculturality, liminality, and ambiguity when they take a physical form in the lives of Adivasis. By looking at Lambada's through the lens of cultural memory, the paper attempts to argue in favor of certainty in culture and memory within cultural boundaries.

Cultural Memory:

Cultural memory or memory culture encompasses the role of memory in a particular society to unify the individual with the aspect of a 'shared past'. Maurice Halbwachs introduced the term 'collective memory' to emphasize the significance of society in providing and preserving memories. According to Halbwachs, "It is in society that people normally acquire memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localise their memories" (Halbwachs 38). Jane Assman defines cultural memory as "a

collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that is obtained through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (qtd in Carrier and Kabalek 44). Both of these definitions by the illustrate, the concept of cultural memory as existing necessarily within a community that has been in existence for too long within the realm of memory and shared by all members to be passed down to future generations. Looking through these definitions, the aspect of the shared past becomes incompatible with the Adivasi life. It enables an individual the possess knowledge necessary for a culturally embedded lifestyle

Cultural Memory in *Havan*

The idea of a shared past becomes apparent in the stories of the ancestors, which are transmitted orally to their descendants in the Adivasi communities. Furthermore, the absence of written records leads to the continual modification of such artifacts as they are passed on to the next generation (Wagoner 1). These elements of oral history as the cultural memory that is passed down from generation to generation are available in abundance in the novel *Havan*. It is typical for every society to have leaders who must be revered for the sacrifice they have made. Such figures in modern history are remembered to through texts, images, television, etc. In the case of Lambada Adivasis in the novel, there is a cultural memory associated with the clan deity 'Sevabhai, Jaggur Jamani a warrior, and Mola, the progenitor' of the community. The tale of the Sevabhai is sung during special occasions to evoke a sense of unity within the community. The connection among individuals is fostered through rituals and similar communal performances. By adhering to specific roles, each individual becomes an integral member of the community without any external coercion that would oppose their desire to be stakeholders.

Bassapa, a character in the novel, having listened to the stories of the community by an elder man, wonders about the history of the community. "Old people like him are the historians of this Thanda. They have been transmitting tradition to the next generation and fortifying it". (Hiremath 19). The essential role stories which carry loads of history on them, play in the fortification of the community becomes evident as even as an outsider, Bassapa acquires so much knowledge about the community. Adivasi societies exhibit significant variations in their means of subsistence, ethical principles, and cognitive faculties when compared to the dominant societies that emancipate them from the oppressions of compulsory roles. Many critics who express their dissent towards the definitive boundaries do so due to their perception of the potential harm that the notion of community may pose to others, a concern that does not hold for Adivasi societies. The formulation of discourses about Adivasis was based on a limited understanding, resulting in their categorization alongside other mainstream societies. This comprehensive perspective of Adivasis undermines the necessity for a distinct position to be allocated to them within the Indian context. The moral framework of Adivasis is devoid of exploitation, characterized by minimal inequality and gender bias, and significantly, manifests a profound reverence for animals and nature as the fundamental essence of their existence (Devy 95).

Formation of cultural memory happen through various elements such as "symbolic heritage embodied in texts, rites, monuments, celebrations, objects, sacred scriptures and other media that serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meanings associated with what has happened in the past and also, they 'bring back the time of the mythical origins, crystallizes collective experiences of the past" (Meckien)

From the very beginning of the novel, there are indications of these expressions of cultural memory in concrete form. The initial narrator, the teacher Bassapa, discovers sixty houses and a few mud houses, with Sevabhai's temple situated at the entrance of the village (Hiremath 6). As the story unfolds, the deep-

rooted nature of Sevabhai's character and teachings becomes apparent to Bassapa, who is an outsider by nature. He is soon overwhelmed by the community's innocence and the love bestowed upon him, eventually identifying himself as a member of the community. Although initially perceived as an outsider, Bassapa does not encounter any violence from the Adivasi community in relation to the loss of cultural memory. The prevailing skepticism among Adivasis towards outsiders stems from the ongoing atrocities they endure at the hands of mainstream societies. Existing as post-memory, they continue to perceive outsiders as untrustworthy crusaders. Since the independence, the status of Adivasis has worsened as they face challenges in every aspect of their lives. Their language and identity are marginalized and misrepresented handicapping the community into dilemmas concerning education, citizenship, lifestyle…etc.

Liminality and Transcultural Dimension :

Liminality is a term employed by Arnold van Genneup in his work *Rites of Passage* to denote the intermediate space between the process of transitioning from one place to another. In this scholarly piece, Gennup explores the "critical periods in the lives of individuals when they undergo significant transitions, usually connected with a change of status in society". Genneup presents three phases of these rituals, namely the "preliminal" rites of separation from the previous world, the "liminal" rites of the threshold stage, and finally the "postliminal" rites of incorporation into the new world (Green 268). The destabilization of structural conceptions related to cultural identity was subsequently taken up by Homi Bhabha, who coined the term "the third phase" in his influential work *Location of Culture* published in 2004. In this scholarly contribution, Bhabha expands upon the notion of liminal space and its associated symbolic registers (such as rites of passage, limen, communitas, and antistructure), employing them to elucidate the complex, non-dichotomous, and fluid nature of identity in the modern (predominantly postcolonial) world (Kalua 23). Both of these concepts play a role in the "process of venerating dynamic spaces of cultural change characterized by shifting identities." (Kaula 23).

The transcultural dimension of memory studies underscores the "fluidity and fuzziness of memory in culture" and the "non-isomorphy of culture, nation, territory, ethnicity, social groups, and memory" (Erll 1). Possession of a definitive sense of one's culture is put into the task by such definitions. Culture is relieved from a concrete entity to a slippery terrain where thee are different elements come into play, making all possessive Landscapes hold a significant position in the formation of memory, serving as "terrains of connectivity"(Bridges and Osterhoudt 1) among social groups. The creation of landscapes involves both human and non-human elements. As landscapes assume agency in memory, they become indispensable components of the mnemonic process. As they influence the behavioural patterns of human beings, in Adivasi communities the land holds an indispensable space not only in the concrete level but also in the realm of culture. No Adivasi thinks of land as a property, to them it is a cultural space that is shared by their ancestors, through the contact of which the stability of the culture is maintained.

The transformation of identities in the novel leads to adverse consequences for the characters, particularly in the case of Somalia. Living with his son in a city where identities are in a state of flux, the protagonist is barred from engaging in his cultural practice of singing to the clan deity. Distressed by his son's willingness to forget his identity, the protagonist returns to the village to witness the changes that have affected the community. His descent into madness and subsequent demise symbolizes the demise of cultural values and memory, which are fundamental aspects of the community. Succumbing to greed, the community has deteriorated internally, finding prosperity only in terms of infrastructural development

such as roads, traffic, and electricity. The village, a space imprinted in Somalia's collective memory, has been erased by the forces of modernism and its consequences. An illustrative example from the narrative would be highly beneficial in this context. Having lost his mental stability, Somalya visits the temple accompanied by another character. "It had well-laid granite flooring; the doors were also covered with the granite stone that was shining brightly. There were tube lights to illuminate the inside. The idol of Seval was made of silver." After seeing the temple Somalya reacts "Where is Sevalal?. He is not here. This is not a temple. He began to shout loudly. I don't want this. I don't want this" (Hiremath 196)

Numerous studies have conclusively shown that space greatly influences an individual's memory. The destruction of landscape patterns, which are vital for collective remembrance within a community, can lead to traumatic experiences. While such distortions are an inherent part of transcultural memory, they can pose challenges to communities that are unprepared for cultural interventions and collaborations with outsiders, including their neighbouring communities. These challenges extend beyond landscape disruptions and encompass the intervention of outsiders in rituals, customs, traditional art forms, culturally embedded language, colonial experiences, and contemporary displacements of Adivasis. The concept of transcultural memory seeks to transcend cultural boundaries. In the case of Adivasis, their cultural memory remains intact within the community as long as there is no external influence. The problems faced by Adivasis often stem from interventions by agents outside their cultural boundaries. As long as society remains unaffected by non-Adivasi elements, both the culture and memory persist within the community itself.

Conclusion

Looking through the notion of memory as a reserved element within the boundaries of culture, the lives of Adivasis as represented in the novel, the researcher has attempted at the importance of culture with decisive memories. On the other hand, in the second part of the paper when transcultural, liminal notions are involved in the analysis, there is a distinctive shift in the ideology that led to the destruction of the community.

The concepts of transcultural, liminal, and the third space are concerned with communities that are distorted by destruction of many kinds therefore the necessity to uphold the identity in the state of flux. There is sufficient evidence for the usage of culture and memory as a yardstick to produce violence. Moreover, such aspects are the outcome of certain events which if normalized in Adivasis, would put the community beyond recovery. When discussing the Adivasis in India, scholars who have worked with them do not consider their multiple agency identities as something to be celebrated or normalized. The preservation of Adivasi cultural boundaries is deemed necessary and must be protected at all costs. Only through the definitive means of culture, only the Adivasis thrive as their land is culture-centric as much as it is ecocentric.

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