Presented at the 12th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
February 20, 21 and 22, 2019

The Conceptualization of the State of Liminality and the Reconstruction of Female Gender Identity in Selected Southeast Asian Stories

Christine Ivy A. Nogot
Department of Literature
Faculty of Arts and Letters
University of Santo Tomas
cianogot@gmail.com
canogot@ust.edu.ph

Abstract: This study presents the meaningful process of liminal transition and determines specific gender characteristic patterns of the female central characters in selected Southeast Asian short stories of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Shahnon Ahmad, and Anchan. These literary texts depict the realistic societal portrayal in human situations, weaving on the themes of a Southeast Asian woman's place in the patriarchal society. This employs the concept of social constructionists asserting that identities are made and made different by social structuring effects of power: a common context of struggle and resistance to the dominant patriarchal structure. The issue of gender identity conceptualized in literary compositions posits the development of gender actualization on female-gender portrayal and with deep awareness of the characters' liminal experiences, thus these will shape the socio-cultural reconstruction of female identity and can pave way to the female ascendance of Southeast Asian women.

Key Words: Liminality; Gender Identity; Social Construction, Patriarchal Society

1. INTRODUCTION

The category of women across Southeast Asian nations is a variable historical and cultural accomplishment, but entrenched attitude delineates women conforming to expected societal and familial roles, in the seemingly standardized and stereotyped behavior imposed by strong social forces. Gender stereotypes that favor males over females are often reinforced in their literary representations. The heritage of relatively favorable gender representations that is biased to women is demarcated into the milieu of the specific gender roles attached to their femininity and identity.

Historically, gender identities were in some way ascribed; some formed relatively narrow, fixed, set of ideas about masculinity and femininity. Critical of naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality assumes that the meaning of women's

Presented at the 12th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
February 20, 21 and 22, 2019

social existence may be culturally and socially defined.

In contemporary societies, exposed to different cultural ideas about gender, the individual plays a more central role in the construction of their personal identity.

The continuing acceptance of the idea that a woman can define her sense of identity, where she can construct and reconstruct the meaning of her personal experiences can be anchored in the anthropological and psychological premise of liminality. Liminality is an experience rich with ambiguity, uncertainty, and the possibility of creative foment. As a literal and figurative point of passage, this stands for change: one can step over the threshold enter new ground and leave everything behind, thus reconstructing a new self. The eventual change provides new knowledge; undergoes a development and be different from the person she was before.

2. MAIN CLAIMS

Cultural expectations and traditions are very much linked to the identity of the Asian community. The issue of gender identity reconstruction and the conceptualization of the liminal stage of the female characters in Southeast Asian short stories are the main thrusts of this study. This aims to show how the liminal stage can shape the socio-cultural reconstruction of female identity.

Butler (1990) pointed out that gender is not constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow rather, a gender is an identity constructed in time and place. (p. 140). In the reconstruction state of female identity, liminality can be an essential feature of human existence because it is through the operation of anti-structure or the liminal stage that human beings gain an understanding of their humanity thus identity.

Beauvoir (1972) boldly highlights that a person is not born feminine but becomes so through cultural conditioning. As the socio-cultural construction of a woman's role is governed by biology, tradition and society, women across time are placed in a seemingly fixed space and gender roles. The idea that a range of male and female identities are already defined, the meaning of these identities change over time and space. From the common social action is a period of analysis of the values of new culture being offered to the liminal individual in his or her liminal state.

3. PRESENTATION OF ARGUMENTS

Human social life is characterized by the existence of an alteration between structured social roles and the blurring of social roles which occurs in what Turner called the "ritual" context, and referred to as the liminal state. This is the in-between state; the penetration stage from the old to the new social structure, where one can either loss the liminal nature then returns to the fold or may gain and reconstruct a new order or structure. While liminal spaces can generate unsettling, disturbing and difficult experiences, in a psychological context, it is also a stage of decision – making; an experience of overcoming a difficulty or crisis. They can also be sites of self-fulfillment, an emancipation from the stranglehold of gender oppression and inequality.

Each central female character in the stories went through the threshold of life. Some violated the boundaries of their traditional gender roles to reconstruct a new pattern of behavior, while the others repress their pain, grieve in isolation, and conceal emotional fragility. However, there is a power available in this kind of weakness, a power derived from their own history and story of being a woman.

Presented at the 12th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
February 20, 21 and 22, 2019

4. REPORT OF OPPOSING OR DIFFERING VIEWS

The idea that gender identities are related to the general divisions of traditional gender roles, posits possibility for people to develop new and different forms of identity. The female roles and their literary delineations in those selections illustrate some vivid portrayals how women across time are placed in a seemingly fixed space and gender role representations. Literature as it flourishes, is a cultural and historical production of experiences, and it is a mirror of the archetypal depiction of women through time. We have to look at gender identity no longer just associated with gender femininity.

Literary narratives present the restrictive role of Southeast Asian women in the realm of female experience which lie within the frame of historical conditions, manifesting distinct gender role. The condition of liminality may be a temporary condition but the liminal phase extends and may become her way of life. It is in this liminal space that we can identify the representation of socio-cultural landscape that has influenced the personal and psychological dimensions of women oppression, gender isolation, and role-limitation.

Stimpson (1989) have found the woman as the beautiful other, as aesthetic object whose power is that of eros, glamor, and fashion; as mother, whose will and power, if checked and directed, will succor; the woman as schemer, whose will and power, if checked will devour (p. 117).

5. CONCLUSION

Common among the Southeast Asian nations is the patriarchal society that encroached female in the domestic and familial spheres of being a daughter, a wife and a mother. Women are generally perceived to be oppressed and devalued, where their status are more often biologically determined, historically defined, and socially conditioned. In the emergence of feminist themes, the woman issues concerning gender relations, narrative of female discovery, portrayal of diminished and damaged woman, image of female alienation or secluded existence are common among these Asian women. In their state of liminality, the central female characters dangle between acceptance of the established cultural gender tradition while some withdraw and condemn the patriarchal culture. The women went through the limbo stage: being betwixt and between against the social structure. In the reconstruction of female gender identity delineated in the literary selections, the liminal state gave them temporary freedom from domestic drudgery and marital abuse in silent resistance. In real context, this impermanent condition can be made meaningful by women in contrast to the dominant space occupied by men.

6. REFERENCES

Alsop, Rachel, et al. (2002). The Social Construction of Gender. In *Theorizing Gender*, (pp. 65-67). UK: Polity Press.

Beasley, Chris. (2011). "Postmodern Feminism-Butler" in *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2011.

Beasley, Chris. (2011). Gender and Feminism: An Overview. In *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (p. 23). Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Beasley, Chris. (2011). Differences: Feminism and 'Race'/Ethnicity/Imperialism (REI)-hooks to Spivak. In *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (p. 74). Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Butler, Judith. (1990). Subversive Bodily Acts. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. (1990) Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire. In Gender Trouble:

Presented at the 12th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
February 20, 21 and 22, 2019

Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Gennep, A. (1960). The Rites Of Passage. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Turner, V. (1969). The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Chicago, Print.

Stimpson, Catharine R. (1989). Feminism and Feminist Criticism" in *Where the Meanings Are*, (p. 117). New York: Routledge.

Voitkovska, L., and Vorontsova, Z. (Spring 2007). Textualizing Liminality in "The Secret Agent."The Conradian, Vol. 32 (No. 1). Retrieve October 25, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20873596