



Forest as a Space of Liminality and Liminal Experiences: A Reading of Avinuo Kire's *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*

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Abstract

This paper aims to delve into the various dimensions of the forest, specifically in terms of liminality or in-betweenness, as depicted in Avinuo Kire's folk fantasy novel *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* (2022), set in Nagaland. The concept of liminality was initially introduced by Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, where he delineates three integral stages in any rite of passage: separation, transition or liminal, and aggregation. Building upon Gennep's groundwork, Victor Turner, a later theorist, extensively delves into the intricacies of the transitional or liminal stage. The analysis will employ two distinct approaches to investigate the relationship between the forest and liminality. Firstly, it will scrutinize the topography of the forest itself as a liminal space, highlighting its inherent characteristics that contribute to the betwixt and between nature of liminality. Secondly, the paper will delve into the liminal experiences of the protagonist, Vime, subsequent to her encounter with the forest.

Keywords: Forest, Liminality, Nagaland, Rites of passage, transition.

Liminality as a Concept

The concept of liminality was introduced by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, originally penned in French in 1908 and later translated into English in 1960. Gennep categorised certain ceremonies performed across cultures, exploring how these rituals initiate a 'passage' or shift in an

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individual's life. He classified the activities involved with these ceremonies into three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation, which he also referred to as preliminal, liminal, and postliminal rites, respectively (Gennep 11). The liminal or transition phase is where an individual "wavers between two worlds" (18). In the sequence of the ceremony, structures like doors and gates serve as liminal or threshold zones, not only as a physical boundary but also as signifying the demarcation between the "foreign and domestic," "profane and sacred" (20). In the realm of anthropology, another figure, Victor Turner, develops extensively on the nuanced characteristics of the liminal phase in his thought-provoking essay titled "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," Turner precisely delves into the workings of this transitional period, describing it as a "period of margin or 'liminality'" and "interstructural." ("Betwixt and Between" 93). Turner views the transition phase as "a process, a becoming... a transformation" rather than a 'state' which, according to him, is fixed and stable (94). This phase is complex and ambiguous, as the subject's position is "structurally... invisible" (95).

In the intricate web of transition, the individual finds themselves in a state of profound indeterminacy, existing in a realm where they are "no longer classified" in relation to the preceding phase and neither classified in terms of the succeeding phase ("Betwixt and Between" 96). This liminal juncture, as substantially dealt with in Turner's other work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, unfolds a tapestry of ambiguity. Turner highlights that the attributes of liminality, embodied by liminal personae or "threshold people," are inherently elusive and ambiguous. This condition, he asserts, allows these individuals to effortlessly slip through the intricate network of classifications that typically serve to locate states and positions within cultural spaces (*The Ritual Process* 95). In the realm of liminality, these entities defy easy categorization, residing in a state of perpetual ambiguity. Neither firmly situated "here" nor definitively placed "there," they move between the positions prescribed and organized by the complex interplay of "law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" norms (*The Ritual Process* 95). This conceptualization of liminality as a state of neither-here-nor-there highlights its elusive nature, challenging the conventional boundaries

and classifications that society so often relies upon to structure and define the spaces individuals occupy within cultural and social frameworks. Analogous to Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, the phenomenon of liminal is subversive. Unbounded by societal norms, liminality as a phase, space, or experience offers freedom and a number of possibilities. Turner remarks:

These liminal areas of time and space... are open to the play of thought, feelings and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of a society's ongoing life. (*The Ritual Process* vii)

Furthermore, Turner asserts that the antistructural nature of liminality embodies the impulse of the social process, functioning as a subjunctive mood where suppositions, desires, and possibilities attain legitimacy (*The Ritual Process* vii). Turner's works extend the implication of the term beyond Genep's simple classification of stages in the rites of passage. It is being interpreted and explored in disciplines like psychology, geography, sociology, and literature, among others. In a modern and complex society, Turner identifies the manifestation of liminality in the creation of art and literature, suggesting that these liminal expressions serve as a fertile ground for the production of creative works (*On the Edge of the Bush* 124). In its broader connotations, the phenomenon of liminality extends beyond the functional aspects delineated by Genep's classification of rites of passage. Turner illuminates how artists and writers navigate the subtleties of liminality through the adept use of "tropes, metaphors, metonyms, and symbolic configurations" (124). As an integral part of the human experience, liminality transcends mere ritualistic categorizations, finding expression in the multifaceted realms of artistic creation and literary exploration.

Avinuo Kire's *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*

The following sections primarily delve into the depiction of the forest and liminality in Avinuo Kire's *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* through two approaches – firstly, an examination of the forest as a liminal space, and secondly, an investigation into the protagonist

Vime's experiences within the forest, navigating the nuanced realm of liminality. In the intricate tapestry of Kire's novel, the forest unfolds as a geographical space that lacks clear and precise boundaries. For instance, the cobbled footpath initially leads Vime into the forest, yet upon her attempt to retrace her steps towards home, she is bewildered to find that "there was no footpath where she knew it ought to be" (Kire 5). This subtle yet profound shift in the forest's spatial dynamics emphasizes its liminal nature, where paths and landmarks fluidly alter, challenging the very foundations of spatial orientation. Adding another layer of complexity to the forest's liminality is the presence of a tree named Kijobode, a guardian of the forest acknowledged by the spirit Tei as the "gateway between the human and spirit world" (Kire 8). Significantly, this gateway remains concealed from the awareness of people, only occasionally unveiling itself to permit human passage. The forest, through the enigmatic presence of Kijobode, emerges not merely as a physical landscape but as a threshold between realms, where the boundaries between the material and the spiritual become permeable, embodying the essence of liminality.

Furthermore, Kire's narrative craftsmanship amplifies the forest's dynamic nature by showcasing its ability to change its landscape at will. Within its expansive domain, the forest incorporates diverse topographies, seamlessly transitioning from fields to lakes, gardens, and beyond. This fluidity and adaptability in the forest's features mirror the flexibility inherent in liminal spaces, where transformations and transitions occur with an almost mystical quality, challenging conventional expectations and offering a canvas for multifaceted experiences. Moreover, our conventional understanding of time as a linear progression is also challenged when discussing liminal spaces. Within the forest, the progression of the day can abruptly shift from afternoon to dusk and back to the afternoon. The narrative reveals a striking occurrence when, after what seemed like an extended stay in the forest, they suddenly awaken in a hospital, discovering that five days had elapsed. The disconcerting revelation intensifies as Vime's father explains that they were discovered unconscious next to the footpath merely a few hours after their absence. This incongruity between perceived and actual time introduces an unsettling aspect to the liminal space, where

the conventional boundaries of time appear to fragment. Vime and Khrielie grapple with the dissonance between their subjective experience within the forest and the objective measure of time in the external world (Kire 165). Moreover, Victor Turner's interpretation of liminality as "the domain of the 'interesting,' or of 'uncommon sense'" (*On the Edge of the Bush* 160) remains valid in the context of the forest in the novel, as it serves as a gateway to a world often overlooked by humans – a realm lying beyond the boundaries of human imagination. The inhabitants of the forest are characterized by fluid or multiple identities. For instance, the tree Kijubode is portrayed as a wise and old man capable of speech. Some other inhabitants are the *Nephilims*, offsprings of men and spirits; *Miawenuos*, described as "diminutive and shy female spirits with long hair and inverted legs" (Kire 22); and *Tekhumiavis* or were-tigers – men capable of transforming their spirits into tigers. As Turner notes, the coexistence of "opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" ("Betwixt and Between" 237).

The character of Tei, a spirit of Vime's age, is particularly intriguing as it resonates with the archetype of the trickster – a liminal figure present in various myths. There is no single definition of a trickster; each culture has its own array of trickster figures with distinct qualities. Generally elusive, the trickster is both friend and foe to humans, exhibiting cleverness and intelligence while engaging in mischievous pranks (Pelton 1; Russo 250). In the novel, on the one hand, Tei becomes a friend to Vime by fulfilling her wish to see her mother; on the other hand, she tries to trap Vime and Khrielie in the forest. As Kijubode explains, such mischievous spirits "can lure vulnerable grieving humans" to the other realm, which is prohibited (Kire 113). Though appearing tiny, Tei possesses "superhuman strength" (23). Another element characterizing Tei as a trickster is her appearance. Initially seen in traditional dress, resembling a girl of Vime's age (5), Tei later appears different, making it challenging for Vime to determine her gender. Tei also appears naked, lacking visible genitalia, possibly suggesting a sexless nature, a characteristic shared by some tricksters. Thus, Tei's existence is also beyond the confinements of sex and gender.

The significance of these figures within the context of liminality can be understood through the concepts of *sacra* and *sacerrima*. *Sacra* refers to the secrets communicated to individuals undergoing initiation rites. These revelations occur through exhibitions, actions, or instructions and are characterised by the elements of ‘disproportion,’ ‘monstrousness,’ and ‘mystery’ (“Betwixt and Between” 103). These elements “withdrawn from their usual settings and combined with one another in a totally unique configuration...startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted” (105). The inhabitants of the forest in Kire’s novel not only serve as captivating characters within the narrative but also hold profound significance within Naga cosmology, myths, and legends. In Victor Turner’s terms, these forest inhabitants can be considered as *sacerrima* or ‘most sacred things,’ entities that, according to Turner, are often elucidated through myths recounting the world-making activities of supernatural beginnings “at the beginning of things” (“Betwixt and Between” 107). The tale of the creation of the earth and the heavens, narrated by the tree Kijubode, is deeply rooted in the Naga’s rich folk tradition, offering a glimpse into the intricate domain of their cosmological beliefs. It recounts that the spirits and humans inhabited a world where their realms often merged seamlessly (Kire 111). However, the advent of human activities, such as the exploitation of nature to construct roads, ushered in the “great exodus,” tearing apart families of both humans and spirits (111). This mythical narrative underscores the profound impact of human actions on the symbiotic relationship between the living and the non-living. The spirits and demons, in response to human interference, retreated from the forests, leaving the hills behind as “keepers of the forest” (113). This mythological tale serves a didactic purpose, aiming to impart wisdom to Vime, the protagonist, about the nature of grief and loss. Kijubode, acting as the storyteller, emphasizes the inherent duality of human experience, conveying that beauty and terror are inseparable facets of the human journey (114). The narrative also urges reflection on the destructive consequences of human actions on the delicate balance between the spiritual and the material.

Another writer from Nagaland, Easterine Kire, also talks about the importance of such myths and folktales. In an interview, she asserts, “The stories are community property, they are shared memory, they are the tribe’s means of passing down history, moral education, rituals and cultural information” (Longkumar 394). Mrs. Sebu, a character from the novel, expresses how elements of nature played an active role in people’s lives in the past (Kire 74). Man’s relationship with nature was twofold; nature and its components were both revered and feared. However, with the advent of Christianity in the tribal lands, nature lost the influence it once had on humans. The colonial modernity brought in by the West in the forms of missionary education and religion sought to ‘tame’ and ‘enlighten’ the Nagas. The Nagas were seen as superstitious, for they believed that the spirits dwelling in nature could cause them untoward harm. Christianity, on the other hand, advocated that there was only one true God; aside from that, it was the individual’s actions that determined their fate and not some element. Thus, the Nagas started embracing the new religion because it brought them out of their fear of nature (Nukshirenla and Dhanaraju 50). Eventually, the regard they had towards it also diminished, and nature became a subsidiary part of their lives.

As humanity asserted its superiority over other life forms on the planet, it led to the creation of boundaries and distinctions such as man vs nature, civilization vs savagery, and logic vs faith. However, the apparent “structural ties” (*The Ritual Process* 96) between various elements sometimes fail to function or provide answers to certain questions. In this context, the forest serves as an anti-structural domain where traditional ties or binaries no longer hold. If we look into Vime’s experience in the in-between world, it is marked by contrast and juxtaposition. For instance, the forest acts as a medium of transport between the past and the present for Vime. The image of her mother that Vime conjures up varies each time. Initially, Vime sees her mother in her maternal grandparents’ place, appearing “younger and lot slimmer” (Kire 23). The broad daylight sun changes into dusk as Vime is transported to a mesmerizing valley where she sees her mother. The time of the day – dusk – aligns with the after-life stage that her mother is in, a place “where human souls stop to take rest before their final journey to paradise” (44). In another

instance, Vime envisions her mother in the kitchen at her own house. However, she later discovers that it was not her mother but “filaments of your [Vime’s] own memory” (109) that Tei used to deceive her. Vime’s vision of her mother raises questions about one’s understanding of reality and truth and the working of memory. The realm of the spirits is sustained through the memories of human beings and is capable of contracting and expanding accordingly. It bears a resemblance to the human consciousness, which harbours, reshapes and preserves the past in myriad ways.

The trajectory of the story unfolds from Vime’s initial innocence and curiosity to a dark, terrifying phase. Numerous instances in the novel highlight the coexistence of safety and danger within the threshold. Vime’s sight of her mother inside the forest brings in a host of experiences for her. She was close to her mother and shared everything with her, but after her demise, she had started feeling a lack of understanding from others. Her elder sister, Neime, was loved by everyone, and people would advise Vime to be more like her sister. She perceived herself as “the misfit, the oddball” (36), who did not belong with other people. Consequently, the forest provided her with solace and a sense of belonging, though for a brief period of time. The narrator describes, “With each step she took, she experienced a sense of belonging, feeling that this was right where she was meant to be” (40). Similarly, for Khrielie (Vime’s father’s newly married wife), the forest served as “a place of refuge” (60) during her formative years. Born to a British soldier who left when Khrielie was still in her mother’s womb, she had a difficult childhood. Her mother, overcome with sadness and devastation, withdrew into her own world. Khrielie would play in the woods, envisioning her “mother being happy and gay” (60). Thus, the forest offers both characters moments that appear to be lacking in their real lives. The narrative, however, takes a turn when Tei offers Vime the opportunity to meet her mother, albeit at the cost of her soul. Tei wishes to bind Vime’s soul forever to her forest song. The forest song, which initially appeared melodious and “evocatively conjured blissful visions of children laughing in the woods amidst the happy gurgling of streams of water” (13), undergoes a sudden transformation. It becomes “a ubiquitous presence, like a pesky bee

buzzing around her head, refusing to leave” (49). The following excerpt reveals the facet of the forest that Vime could not see earlier:

The woman she met was right. The forest did not look as inviting in the late hours. Early dusk had begun to set and a wraithlike mist shrouded the wood like a thin muslin cloak... It suddenly dawned on Vime that there was an unnatural stillness about the atmosphere. She strained her ears for sounds of birds chirping and the familiar cries of forest creatures but she could only hear the uneasy beating of her heart. (46)

Yet, despite her reluctance, Vime tells Tei that she is willing to do whatever it takes to meet her mother. Immediately afterwards, she experiences a chilling sensation passing through her body. Thereafter, whenever she approaches the forest, the song has a different impact on her. It no longer charms her; instead, it “made her feel strange; incomplete, like her insides had grown hollow, soulless” (76). Furthermore, like a nightmare, the song begins to infiltrate her dreams and consciousness. Vime faces another challenge when Tei captures Khrielie; if she goes to rescue Khrielie, she must give up her chance to meet her mother. As an individual standing at the threshold, Vime must decide her future course of action. Showing maturity, she chooses to prioritize finding Khrielie. The primary purpose of the rites of passage is transformation. Thus, Vime’s journey to the forest is not merely an episode in her life; it carries the seed of change from a naïve girl to a mature individual who has learnt to accept and embrace grief. The tragic demise of her mother marks the initiation of Vime’s journey, leaving her feeling as if her “centre was now lost” (3), a poignant indication of the separation phase within the rites of passage framework. According to Turner, this separation phase involves the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a set of cultural conditions, essentially signifying a departure from a prior state (*The Ritual Process* 94). Vime’s encounter with otherworldly beings within the forest, particularly with the sage-like figure of Kijubode, assumes the role of an elder guiding a neophyte through the rites. Through Kijubode’s guidance, Vime is bestowed with a distinctive perspective on mortality and death, being enlightened with the profound notion

that her mother's soul has been liberated from the confines of her decaying body (Kire 109).

In the later part of the story, Vime again has glimpses of her mother; however, these visions are not rooted in her own memories but emanate from her father's recollections. Furthermore, her mother's image is replaced by that of her father, standing "completely alone within a vortex of darkness" (135). This transformation in the image serves as a catalyst for Vime's realization that she is not alone in her grief; as the narrator describes the moment, "For the first time, Vime forgot her own brokenness and felt the suffering of another in a truly visceral way" (135). Vime, initially devastated by her father's remarriage, eventually accepts Khrielie's presence in her life. Their connection is forged through shared experiences in the forest, both past and present, culminating in a bond that becomes instrumental in Vime's evolving understanding and positive outlook towards life. As the narrative unfolds, Vime's transformative journey reaches its pinnacle, summarized in her sister's observation that she "came back a different person" (172). This finally marks the incorporation phase in the rites of passage. In this phase, Vime achieves a "relatively stable state once more" (*The Ritual Process* 95). This culmination underscores the depth and richness of Vime's transformative odyssey, portraying how her experiences within the liminal space of the forest have left an indelible mark on her character and outlook on life.

To deeply understand the transitions and changes in human consciousness, one must view it through the lens of psychology as well. The shifts and dis/re-orientations an individual experiences at times are topics discussed in psychology. Carl Jung's theory regarding the psyche and the connection between the outer and inner worlds can be suitably applied to comprehending the space of the forest. Kire's utilization of the forest space holds significant symbolism. Jung extensively examines the symbolic nature of things around us in his works. Jung notes the connection primitive humans would make between "outer sensory experiences" and one's "inner, psychic occurrences" (Jung 7). He terms this level of unconscious as "the collective unconscious" (3) and its contents as "archetypes" (4) because of its universality. The forest in *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* can be placed under the "archetypes of transformation" (80), which Jung defines as "typical situations, places, ways and means"

(80), and its goal is “illumination or higher consciousness” (82). Similarly, JC Cooper, in his work *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, draws an equivalence between the forest and the “realm of the psyche” (71). He articulates the forest’s role as a threshold symbol, a symbolic representation of the soul venturing into the perils of the unknown – a realm encompassing death, the secrets of nature, and the spiritual world that mankind must penetrate to unravel meaning (71). Myths and legends from across the world are filled with episodes where characters dream or conjure up such images. These are interpreted in terms of humankind’s condition and its past, present and/or future. In literature and art, the forest is often used as a symbol to represent the depths of the human psyche or unconsciousness. It serves as a mirror to one’s true self, a guide to the subconscious mind, and a glimpse into another reality that may not be easily understood. As a metaphor for the human mind, the forest represents one’s fears and doubts, threatening to consume an individual completely. As the protagonist journeys through the forest, they are confronted with their own internal struggles and must navigate through the labyrinth of their own mind. The only way to navigate through it is to witness and experience the beauty of life, realize that not everything is lost, and move forward by accepting the past.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the forest in Kire's narrative transcends its physical existence, becoming a potent symbol interwoven with psychological depth and symbolic resonance. It symbolizes not only the complexities of the human psyche but also the transformative journey towards self-discovery and acceptance. The forest, as a liminal space, implies the potential for coexistence and harmony amid contrasting elements such as vitality and decay, life and death, man and animal, safety and danger, chaos and peace, happiness and grief, past and present, civilization and savagery, and light and darkness. The liminal or in-between state is also characterized by ‘unhomeliness,’ where one moves away from familiarity. As a result, this kind of contested space allows for multiple possibilities. Kire has also stressed how nature is a crucial force for the development and well-being of the individual as well as the society. The novel, thus, imparts

valuable lessons on the cycle of life and everything that comes with it.

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