

Navigating Transition: Freedom, Limitation and the Post-colonial Persona in Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table*

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Introduction

Michael Ondaatje's latest work, *The Cat's Table*, offers a distinct iteration of the postcolonial and liminal subject in surroundings defined by the plurality of the postmodern voice and the emergent experience of the self. The central device is simple: set in 1953, immigration from Sri Lanka to England is slowed down to a twenty-one-day sea voyage to allow the character to remain in a state of transition, 'betwixt and between' worlds, for a longer and more sustained period than would be commonplace today. It is a long enough transition period for the vessel to become, in and of itself, a distinct and microcosmic world in which ordinary rules are suspended. Ondaatje's narration is subjective even while it embraces a wide plurality of voices, presenting not the melding of these personas into a functional or dysfunctional, coherent or fractured whole, but offering, instead, a true kaleidoscope, indicating clearly that the cat's table, the venue for those least honored and least regarded, may indeed be the place to look if one hopes to capture diversity. It is within this space that Ondaatje offers an innovative exploration of the liminal subject, a bold development relative to both his own previous literary work and prevalent assumptions that are made regarding the liminal subject in the colonial or postcolonial setting.

Liminality describes the position of the subject who is undergoing a transition between two realities or states; thus, the sense of the liminal is an 'interstitial or in-between space, a threshold area'.¹ It is this sense of standing on the 'threshold' between realities, able to enter (or exit) both or all, which distinguishes the idea of liminality from the related term, 'limit'. Indeed, liminality exists at the limits – at the border between one cultural world and another. Yet the very fact that it exists at the limits means that the liminal position is not necessarily limited; rather, the position is positively defined by the separation from (and later re-integration into) the broader culture. By the same token, there is a subtle but important distinction between the liminal and marginal subject, although both occupy the space at the limits of social norms. Liminality as first conceptualized by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 is a ritualistic pattern of behaviour which occurs when an important transition or threshold is reached and crossed. Van Gennep identified three stages of such transition: separation from the larger society, the liminal or in-between period, and eventual re-assimilation into the society.² Victor Turner further developed the idea of liminality and expanded its application and scope. Prominent in Turner's work is the awareness of liminality as a creative and liberating process. It is a period during which one remakes oneself, or is remade through temporal, spatial or symbolic passage. It was Turner who delineated the differences between liminal characters, marginal characters and outsiders, although in practice there can be some ambiguity or overlap in this regard. Turner states: 'Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but

¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 117.

² Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1909).

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unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity.’³

In order to be sufficiently sustained that it may be observed, liminality must be carefully delineated, either temporally, spatially, or both. Augé talks about ‘transitional places’ such as airport or hotels as ‘transit through “non-space”’; this may be what Ondaatje creates through the device of the sea voyage between continents and cultures.⁴ The ship forms the ideal in-between space, all the more so because, as mentioned, the historical period and the mode of transportation dictate that the transitional stage is expanded or stretched out to a period of several weeks. Likewise, Ondaatje’s selection of a protagonist provides another opportunity for examination of the liminal state. Van Gennep identified coming of age rituals as a liminal period, and the boy’s somewhat precocious independence aboard the ship suggest a passage between childhood and a more independent state that encompasses a degree of agency. He is, in fact, not in the liminal period between childhood and adulthood, but between childhood and adolescence, a passage that is less often examined but perhaps no less dramatic. Van Gennep suggests that the liminal ritual of passage is often fraught with danger – there may even be uncertainty as to whether the subject will survive it – and this sense of danger and uncertainty, also, is carried through in Ondaatje’s novel. Of course, both the passage itself and the danger involved extend beyond Michael; other characters simultaneously experience their own versions of it, whether through a transition to adulthood, to death, or to an otherwise newly-defined state of being. These echoes confirm the protagonist’s own transitional state.

The Cat’s Table opens up to us as we begin to examine these various expressions of liminality and the ways in which they converge with marginalisation or limitation. Being relegated to the ‘cat’s table’ clearly denotes social marginalisation; yet this is just one element of the numinous zone that the young boy occupies and which will, at the other end of things, the conclusion of his journey, eject him into a new version of society which he must, from this point, inhabit. At the same time, the floating world of *The Cat’s Table* offers us a sensual, multi-dimensional picture of postcolonial and postmodern identities. Michael is on a voyage between East and West, and the author is always cognisant of the cultural and colonial connotations of this movement. Yet the character is seemingly unconcerned with otherness and limitations imposed by prejudices of the larger culture. His drifting location, for all its necessarily transitory nature, becomes a fully actualised realm in which this boy and his closest companions operate. The ship becomes ‘place’, the twenty-one-day journey becomes ‘time’, at once all of either element that the protagonist needs to know, and, simultaneously, none of it.

Ondaatje’s protagonist is thus poised at an in-between age, when one has gained mastery over the concerns of childhood and is still on the cusp of adult concerns, aware of them but not captured by them. Emily Hancock stated that a girl at the age of nine is a fully formed person, only to be subjected to fragmentation and an eclipsing of her former clarity and sense of self once she reaches puberty.⁵ The same might be said of the eleven-year-old boy that Ondaatje here evokes. Michael has

³ Victor W. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988) 233.

⁴ M. Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁵ Emily Hancock, *The Girl Within* (New York: Dutton, 1989).

clarity of purpose and is not at all compromised in his interactions with any of the variety of people that surround him. With his two companions, he prepares to master the ship. Michael, Cassius and Ramadhin roam free, unencumbered by supervision and only mildly inconvenienced by the official rules of life aboard the ship. They are determined only to learn what is going on and to leave their imprint upon it. Following their shared and independently conceived agenda, they set challenges and tasks for one another, such as smoking an entire cane chair by the time the journey is over. They begin immediately to tell time by the activities of the strangers around them, which appear as inevitable and opaque as forces of nature.

The boys' apparent autonomy and clarity of purpose is called into question, reminding us of the co-existence of marginality and liminality and the fact that liminality itself is and must be unstable ground. The pre-adolescent character is a walking paradox whose voice and perceptions shape the 'world' that the ship provides. He is master of his own life aboard the ship, while at the same time, socially, he has no power at all, being at the mercy of the movement of that drifting and fluctuating locale and all the characters within it and outside of it – those who sent him and those who will receive him at the other end – and of the dubious hospitality that is offered to him at the 'cat's table'. Dissonance between shifting worldviews is introduced with the voice of the adult narrator; for example, whereas the child Michael tells us at the beginning that his city, Colombo, is immediately 'invisible' to him in comparison to the brighter light of the ship,⁶ adult Michael, wiser and more considered, speaks of having been profoundly impoverished by his move, as 'grandeur had not been added to my life but had been taken away' (35). This is a remarkable statement given the description of the ship that precedes it. While the Michael and his companions are, in some manner, 'safe' on the ship, lulled to sleep by its engines, they are also, at every moment, in jeopardy. They both know it and do not know it. As Van Gennep points out, both power and danger characterise this juncture between existing and newly established identities.

The postcolonial subject must surpass others in mastery of a location and milieu that is at once knowable – a new world to be explored and made one's own – and unknowable, causing the subject to depend on arbitrary and opaque signposts to piece together meaning. The postcolonial subject is forced into a new world, perhaps knowing only much later how much it is that he has lost, because adhering too closely to it might have stopped him from making that all-important step. Here again, we see the similarity between the marginal and liminal positions. The postcolonial subject contemplates and enacts a change which will put him, in a sense, at odds with the identity and orientation of the larger community. The liminal subject makes the passage and eventually rejoins the world, but the world he rejoins may be a drastically altered one. Or, it may be that a provisional sense of permanence is established within the transitory state.

To a degree, liminality is both defined and determined by its outcome, re-assimilation into the society, but it is an outcome that by necessity ends the period of liminality and the identity associated with it. It would seem, then, that the liminal subject (or liminar, to borrow Turner's term) must always be aware of his eventual re-

⁶ Michael Ondaatje, *The Cat's Table* (New York: McClelland & Stewart, 2011) 3. Subsequent references to this book will be included in the text in parentheses.

assimilation into society. However, we must question whether that awareness, in and of itself, limits the liminal subject's experience of otherness, and whether, conversely, there are subjects who define themselves through sustained belonging in a community that expresses and embodies that in-between state. Turner himself extensively observed the modern 'communitas movements' and their tendency to 'try to create a communitas and a style of life that is permanently contained within liminality. ... Instead of the liminal being a passage, it seemed to be coming to be regarded as a state.'⁷ However, it would appear that these attempts at making permanent what is otherwise transitory may be self-limiting. The belonging to a coherent group, on the one hand, and the persistent separation from mainstream society on the other would appear to erode or diminish claims of liminality.

Aside from the fact that the ship itself, as a means of movement which prolongs transition and turns it into a norm, is an ideal container for the liminal subject, the rules of engagement that underlie the character's existence on the ship are in fact ideal conditions for liminality. First, the subjection of the boys to scrutiny and social rules is limited because of their low social position. Michael explains that being of 'no social importance ... persuaded us into an accurate belief that we were invisible to officials such as the Purser and the Head Steward, and the Captain' (10). Moreover, because of the transitory nature of their floating world, Michael notes that 'whatever we did had no possibility of permanence' – there was, therefore, no inherent limitation to prohibit them from doing it (80). Another character, Michael's cousin Emily, whose process mirrors his own in many ways, experiences similar freedom based on her lack of guidance, and the narrator states: 'There was no secure map that Emily could rely on, so I suppose she invented herself' (11). There was, moreover, a break from past identity, the very 'separation' that is the first stage in Van Gennep's process of liminality and transition: Michael's companion Cassius asks that the boys 'keep our backgrounds to ourselves' (40).

The juxtaposition between eastern and western cultures is richly represented, a constant presence, yet it is not permitted to become a defining principle. Michael's friends are Ramadhin and Cassius, the latter representing the founding power of the West, the former the representative of Indian culture. Lest the association be missed, Ondaatje's narrator alludes to the foundations of western culture and politics when discussing Cassius: 'There was a gentle democracy in Cassius. In retrospect, he was only against the power of Caesar' (40). Striking as the East/West delineations are, Ondaatje often seems to introduce them primarily in order to dispel their assumed power. The boys' names are indeed based on eastern and western cultural identities, yes, but at Cassius' insistence they have left their backgrounds behind and they exist in harmony with one another. We see this good-natured dismissal of the division between East and West in another instance, too. Sir Hector, suffering from rabies, has the means to choose between traditional ayurvedic herbal remedies and English doctors. While choosing the latter, he does retain the services of 'one Moratuwa ayurvedic' (67). However, the combined and competitive powers of western and eastern science are not sufficient to save him from an event so random that it is justifiably considered a curse; moreover, in death, his title, indicating his position within a set cultural context, dissipates. Michael's own name appears to hail from the

⁷ Turner 261

west, but well into the narrative we learn that he has a second name, a shipboard name, 'Mynah' – appropriately enough, the mynah is a bird of passage hailing from Southeast Asia. The name change aptly represents Michael's status as a 'liminar', and the use of the name later in life (in his letter to Cassius) establishes the fact that a permanent change of identity has occurred.

Dissociation from a fixed locale and identity becomes the norm aboard the ship, and perhaps it is this element, in and of itself, that profoundly changes the position of the liminal subject and opens up creative possibilities. In any case, Ondaatje's characters seem immune to the angst that often pervades the postcolonial position. Chelva Kanaganayakam identifies an 'anxiety' in being postcolonial that has emerged in literature and public consciousness: early in the postcolonial era there was an assumption of commonality; but if one takes Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in the 1980s as a point of departure, 'new modes that respond to complex anxieties' have been one result⁸. 'Anxiety' here refers to ... a fear of the unknown, or ... a loss of absolute certainties⁹. According to Kanaganayakam, writers respond to these limiting, rather than liminal, circumstances through awareness of the self as opposed to the other, so that 'one is either inside the whale or outside of it'¹⁰. According to this critic, Ondaatje has always been one of the writers who resist this dualism. For example, in *Anil's Ghost* Ondaatje employed 'multiple perspectives are inserted into the text deliberately to pre-empt political bias [and] multiple narratives destabilize the notion of a univocal narrative voice', working within structures primarily for the purpose of interrogating and overthrowing them¹¹. In *The Cat's Table*, however, Ondaatje takes one step beyond this, considering what happens past the point of destabilised identities. At the same time and perhaps not coincidentally, a sense of fixed geographic place is lost. When *Anil's Ghost* was published, some critics commented on the fact that Ondaatje had finally written a novel about Sri Lanka. But here, Sri Lanka so quickly becomes 'invisible' and the passage, the ship, is far more real.

In this arena of liminality, Michael co-exists with a cast of characters, some familiar to him already, some foreign and bizarre, who become his world, right or wrong. There is both injustice and benevolence. The forces of nature, including both violent storms and the pleasure that is to be taken from movement of the ship through ocean, are experienced and survived by this character. The role of those who are in charge of him, before, during and after, becomes remote and reduced. All that matters is the character's own ability to function, to cope, to get by, and in doing so, to add to the fullness of his own understanding. As mentioned, this is an experience that will stay with him throughout his life, other experiences projecting outward from this primary passage. After all, the liminal character is born not once but twice, the second birth being the precisely this passage, this geographic movement, which alters him fundamentally, making him into something he would not otherwise have been. He is continuously being born into a new life, but, as we shall see, the sense of a mystical

⁸ Chelva Kanaganayakam, 'The Anxiety of being Postcolonial: Ideology and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel'. *miscelanea: a journal of english and american studies* 28 (2003) 51

⁹ Kanaganayakam 44

¹⁰ Kanaganayakam 44

¹¹ Kanaganayakam 47

transition occurs most particularly during one memorable night, when the ship passes through the Suez Canal.

Up until that time, the ship provides the context for a linear, progressive transition that the characters set out to master. Throughout the voyage, Michael's initial impression holds and is transferred to the reader – that life aboard this floating city is more vivid and in some sense more real than any other place. Colombo immediately becomes invisible; England, when finally glimpsed, is a poor, pale, rural place, and prior to that point does not even exist in the imagination. Aden, their first and last direct foray into the Middle East, is the place where the boys acquire haircuts and a dog, while Emily, disguised as a young man, spends time 'carrying things' (105). In short, it lives up to no one's expectations, and the company returns rather sheepishly to the ship to resume what has become their 'real' life.

One questions the result of the journey which is defined by transition but somehow continuously transcends it by becoming a semi-stable basis for liminal identity and experience. Helpfully, Ondaatje provides a direct answer, spelling it out lyrically. The transitional journey is, for the liminal subject, a repositioning of the heart. It cannot go on forever; sooner or later, everybody has to go 'into the world'; every child had to grow up; the rules of that larger life reassert themselves, or we move into their zone once more, and carry on. But the heart is changed – the person is changed – by that transition between places. Michael explains:

I once had a friend whose heart 'moved' after a traumatic incident that he refused to recognize. It was only a few years later, while he was being checked out by his doctor for some minor ailment, that this physical shift was discovered. And I wondered then, when he told me this, how many of us have a moved heart that shies away to a different angle, a millimeter or even less from the place where it first existed, some repositioning unknown to us. Emily. Myself. Perhaps even Cassius. How have our emotions glanced off rather than directly faced others ever since, resulting in simple unawareness or in some cases cold-blooded self-sufficiency that was damaging to us? Is this what has left us, still uncertain, at a Cat's Table, looking back, looking back, searching out those we journeyed with or were formed by, even now? (258)

This more complex description of the results of a 'moved heart', beating perfectly well but forever at a skewed angle, belies to some degree Michael and Emily's statement to one another, a few pages earlier, that each of them belongs nowhere (250-1). The latter is, perhaps, the easy conclusion, but Michael's own narration leads us to doubt that it is true. The characters on board the boat form a society, reaching out to each other throughout the years and distance and aided in their quest by small pieces of shared information impossible for anyone else to know, such as Michael's shipboard name, unknown to anyone at either end of his passage, which later becomes like a talisman by which those who were on that journey can recognise one another. It is not so much that they belong nowhere; it is the fact that the place where they do belong, which always bends them toward itself, is itself both selective and transitory.

Like the man whose heart changed position by a traumatic event, unacknowledged, the narrator's heart is re-positioned by a prolonged 'event' lasting

twenty-one days, and only occasionally traumatic. However, in this case, it is both acknowledged and recognised. Indeed, this novel represents Ondaatje's effort to do so. In it, we have a unique expression of what the liminal postcolonial subject feels, who he is, and what he does. He exists within a place of transition where belonging can be forged through participation, where social barriers exist as an echo or shadow, where subjects come in contact with one another through a kaleidoscope of interactions and impressions, and where sometimes there is, magically, access to *everything*, every room, every form of riches, if one is small, flexible and brave enough to fit through a grate. It is a place where not even the protection of a noble title and the best medicine of East and West can protect against seemingly random fate. It is a place where everything is in motion, and it carries the liminal subject from one world all the way to the next, acutely aware of the transitions, but cushioned within a place of his own that both masters space and is subject to it.

The passage through the Suez Canal is related with more intensity than any other event in the novel. The sentences become short and chopped; the language is highly sensory, as though the intention is to burn an impression upon the reader's mind. The narrator himself leaves the intensity of the scene to discuss a shadow of it that radiates, years later, like a ripple in a pond – adult Cassius' exhibition of paintings in which he perfectly records the visual impressions of that night. The narrative transition from the night itself to the exhibition of paintings, decades later, and the perfect echoing of the one in the other, reminds one of looking away from the a bright light only to retain a visual imprint within one's eye. The eye itself, sufficiently dazzled, becomes like a camera, containing the ghost of a vision.

The passage through the canal is the epicenter of the journey, the most 'vivid memory' (128) and for good reason; essentially, it *is* the passage between East and West, the inevitable movement of the postcolonial immigrant subject. The narrowness of the canal, the impinging of the land and its activities on the otherwise sovereign entity of the ship – these factors contribute to the drama of the moment, the sense that an event is unfolding. It is the innermost passage within a passage. The sense of the event is built by the allusion to it right before it occurs in the narrative: 'Another tea-time lecture was given ... to prepare us for the Suez Canal' (126). On the following page, a short statement is given a paragraph of its own, both ominous and promising, set off from the rest of the text:

It was the night we never slept. (127)

The passage through the canal is like a birth that must be attended by an expert, an Arab harbour pilot whose expertise is undertaking this delicate journey. This man, Ondaatje tells us, walks through the ship as though he owns it, ignoring all existing and established authority, which, seemingly, has ceased to *be* authoritative. Once again, like the ship journey itself, this is a passage in which different rules apply. Intense, fragmented images follow, like kaleidoscopic fragments of a life. The boys shout to the workers on shore; they smell Arabic food, a welcome change after the European food they had been eating aboard ship. Someone throws them an orange: 'An orange from the desert!' Michael marvels (129).

The impressions of the crossing are chaotic and random; in contrast, however, the crossing itself is both tightly orchestrated and mystical. The narrator tells us:

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‘Radio contact had been at work for more than a day so that we would enter, as we had to, at the very moment of midnight’ (129). One wonders, naturally, whether this is entirely feasible; the tight scheduling of the passage is of course very likely, but ‘the very moment of midnight’ seems more akin to a spell or incantation. It is repeated at the conclusion of the passage: ‘This was the reason our arrival at El Suweis had been carefully timed to begin at midnight – in order that we would reach Port Said in daylight’ (130). Is this, one wonders, a sufficient explanation for insistence upon that rather gothic delineation of time, ‘the very moment of midnight’? Would an approximation of midnight not have been as effective in ensuring that the boat reached Port Said in daylight? Whether it is an accurate reporting or, as it seems, in impressionistic one, it is symbolically fitting. Midnight is a quintessentially liminal time, the passage between one day and another, the time when realities collide. This is, indeed, exactly what occurs. Ondaatje goes first to the logical and successful conclusion of that passage – ‘we entered the Mediterranean with our eyes wide open’ (130) – and only later, after averting his gaze from the event itself and focusing on its echo, Cassius’ art exhibition, does he find, through the clear vision of hindsight, a more complex and much more elegiac expression of the moment. Just as they were moving forward, necessarily, they were also inevitably looking back at everything they were leaving behind:

I was back on the railing, watching, which was where Cassius was emotionally, when he was doing these paintings. Good-bye, we were saying to all of them. Good-bye. (132)

In that good-bye, one senses the leaving not only of the people on the docks whom the boys momentarily and randomly glimpsed, but an entire culture and continent. At least, this is what their geographical position implies. Yet, the explanation is improbable; Ondaatje has sufficiently broken down any semblance of sentimentality regarding eastern and western identities to argue against this proposition. Perhaps, instead, the boys are saying ‘good-bye’ to that magical moment of transition – to liminality itself. As mentioned at the outset, liminality must be a self-limiting, tightly circumscribed period. The transition between the eastern and western worlds must be undertaken by the liminal postcolonial subject, and transition itself becomes a temporary positioning that must eventually be left. It is, as Van Gennep and Turner state, a perilous time – Michael and Cassius are perched precariously on the ship’s rails, in danger of falling, at which point, the narrator relates, not only their positioning but their very lives and selves would change: ‘We could have fallen and lost our ship and begun another fate – as paupers or princes’ (129). The moment of transition, that line between one reality and another, carries with it the threat not of physical harm or non-survival (although that might be a logical consequence of falling off the ship) but of unwittingly falling into, and belonging thereafter to, a different world and life. Of course, this threat is ironic because that whole nature of the passage dooms one to it, at any rate. One cannot pass through this passage and remain the same. Perhaps the liminal subject is one who avoids ‘losing his ship’ for as long as possible.

In the end, what are we to conclude about the liminal self as depicted in *The Cat’s Table*? Van Gennep described it as a ‘life crisis’ and a rite of passage. The

liminal subject is vulnerable but powerful. He is able to slip in between the cracks where others cannot. He infiltrates. It is not correct to say that no rules apply to him, but the ones that do are sometimes random and unexpected. Michael is able to find his way into any cabin; the boys smuggle in the dog that brings about the death of the most powerful man on board the ship. And yet the crossing of class boundaries takes persistent effort and cunning.

In a sense, Ondaatje is standing up for this lost, transitory, liminal self, whose life (despite his eventual re-assimilation) is defined not wholly by one set of cultural norms or another, but by the movement between them, which becomes its own 'place', temporarily more real than any other. The author implies that the existence of the liminal self is phenomenological, as defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty; it comes into being only through doing and experience, and is influenced both by appearance and empirical fact, but cannot be entirely accounted for by either.¹² Standing still, that self barely exists, which is not to say that the core persona behind that liminal self would cease to exist. However, he would become subject to the cultural norms that affect people in various fixed locales; he would fit into them, or fail to. He may be marginalised; he would begin once more to be defined by limitations and the need to overcome them. The experience of being without such a fixed locale is, Ondaatje implies, one that is worth knowing and considering. It is an occurrence that can forever alter the position of the heart. And it is a self that is worth sitting on the rail and saying *good-bye, good-bye* to when one sees it slipping away.

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1945).