

Book Critique

The Oral Memory of the B-Mors: From Ritual to Community Longing

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“Where you are,” an incomplete utterance (rumored to be) soliloquized by Fan that sparks an out-of-the-blue interest in her among the people of B-Mor is where Change-Rae Lee’s *On Such A Full Sea* officially takes off (Lee, 2014: 30). It is a strange tale of the B-Mor collective whispering and imagining the history of their own. The disappearance of Reg followed by Fan’s solitary quest for him trigger an unfamiliar sentiment among the B-Mors who paid little to no attention to prior disappearance (of Uncle Kellen and Auntie Virginia). Fan and Reg somehow became the talk of the town which, in the process, inspires exuberant gossips and rumors. While these gossips and rumors are iterated and transmitted, the story serves both as an oral folktale and a written narrative. As an audience, we, in consequence, simultaneously listen to the voices and the words of the B-Mors.



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“You can bet that where we live now was mourned, too, in its time, and though it may be surprising to consider, someday this community might be remembered as an excellent place...” (Lee, 2014: 2). The multiple narrators, “we” of B-Mor, begin by unveiling a vague vision for the slightest possibility that their community which is located at the lowest class of the capitalist society might prosper in the future. The narrators, “we,” is an embodiment of *heteroglossia* where the multiplicity of consciousness collides and creates an eerie blend of collectivity and individuality. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, in the simplest sense, heteroglossia “is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” (Lee, 2014: 324). This seamless fusion of multi-voices that reflects conversations of the B-Mors and the authorial voice that narrates the story of *On Such A Full Sea* is the fundamental constituent of the oral-like storytelling.

Their storytelling is an act of ritual that is performed in order for them to make sense of their identity as a community during the *rite of passage*, a significant event that marks a change in social life. Based on Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, Victor Turner investigates how a society/community, whether it is regulated by the norms of pre-modernity or modernity experience, experience the rite of passage which has three phases: “*separation, transition, and incorporation*” (Turner 24). “The first phase of *separation* clearly demarcates sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time” (Lee, 2014: 24). In the case of B-Mor, it is when the B-Mors start to recognize the dominant sociocultural hegemony, the Charter's consumer culture, that they are enslaved by. In the beginning, the B-Mors live as machines who produce market-

driven commodities for the wealthy Charters who consume only meticulous commodities. The B-Mors lead their life cherishing “how solid the producer-consumer relationship has been for both communities” (Lee, 2014: 89-99). As they are aware of this relationship, a question of doubt arises, “What does all this mean for the rest of us in B-Mor, we who have made our way through steady work, and if not fantastically prosperous like Charters, have for generations endured with aplomb and dignity” (97). During this stage, they begin to carefully look at the mirror into which they initiate the projection of ontological separation between themselves and the Charters. That is to say, they begin to explore the meanings of their existence without having to identify with the aforementioned producer-consumer relationship.

Entering the second phase, the *transition*, “the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo” (Turner, 1982: 24). At this point, the community experiences what he calls *liminality* or in-betweenness where they are already separated from the previous understanding of the world but not yet formed a new understanding. This liminal phenomenon is ignited the moment the B-Mors start to contemplate their social life along with their relationship with the Charters. The story of Fan becomes an area of oral dialogism¹ where the people of B-Mors communicate and invent their *repertoire*, a kind of performative archive that “participates in the transfer and the continuity of knowledge” (Taylor, 2003: 5). Fan, as well as her story, are

¹ “Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (Bakhtin, 1981: 426).

symbolized as collective memory that binds the B-Mors together as a collective anchored by the same history, as they say:

The truth is that we could not. As conceived, as constituted, we may in fact be of a design unsustainable. Which is why we needed Fan, in both idea and person. For within her the only promise that could deliver us, the seeds of all our futures, Charters' and B-Mors' and even of the shunned souls out in the counties... (Lee, 2014: 104)

Apart from their knowledge of the past utopia, the B-Mors only know the ideal values of productivity and efficiency which are explicitly expressed through one of the most beloved rituals of the community, the fish-culling festival². As descendants of people who come from "someplace" that scattered across the former world with no collective genesis, Fan's story is a quintessential means that strengthens their shared identity as a B-Mor citizenry in relation to the outer world (Lee, 2014: 1).

The B-Mor's repertoire is central to the narrative as a whole in which it performs as a communal body that embarks on a vicarious pilgrimage with Fan. As the audience only learns what happens to Fan through the word-of-mouth narrative, what is actually revealed is not Fan's story per se but a collective consciousness of the B-Mors who experience a significant shift of awareness as a community. This pilgrimage becomes collective memory and history of the B-Mors where, at a particular moment, they struggle to establish a sense of agency while experiencing the in-betweenness of *liminality* at the crossroad of social transition.

² See pp. 94.

The third phase, the *incorporation*, “symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subjects to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society” (Turner, 1982: 24). At this stage, the community is ready to be integrated into the social mechanism again with a different identity. After what seems to be faint curiosity, never-before-seen insurgence takes shape in B-Mor. “FREE REG,” “FREE ME, REG. I MISS REG,” and “BO LIWEI” (Lee, 2014: 240, 294, 296) are painted on public places as a burst of vandalism and demonstration hits the community. These symbolic acts signify their new sense of self which emerges from the shared narrative that is embellished throughout Fan’s mythic pilgrim.

Towards the end, the narrators articulate:

What we have left is our assembly, and therein lies the unexpected trepidation. We have lashed ourselves together, we are checked by jowl but now in an entirely different way, yet we can’t help but murmur the question that is surfacing in all our eyes: so who are we now? (Lee, 2014: 309)

Answering this question, the narrators eventually conclude through a glimpse of B-Mor’s new way of life in which they now become more detached from the totality of consumer culture which emphasizes on the values of productivity and efficiency. There emerges a distinct image of life where a practice of socializing is revived through which the B-Mor collective now take time to enjoy each other’s company and relish a sense of community together³.

³ See pp. 337.

Although Fan is simply an untraceable conglomeration of memories created by countless dialogues of the B-Mors, she becomes a beacon of hope for the future as B-Mor experiences a social transition where they are uncertain where to look forward. To the B-Mors, she is a repertoire that gives them a sense of belonging, an identity that they long for.

References

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