

DISCIPLINE IN FOCUS

Reflections on Transitional Phenomena

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Transitional Phenomena: Questions

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Is 'modern' life alienated? What reasonable chance do we stand of attaining the status of a unity, an individual, in the midst of vast change? The term 'self' has begun to generate an influential discourse around these questions in contemporary thought. The term is often evoked as an assurance felt within, imparting a sense of continuity to the experience of all-pervasive change, even as its loss is associated with chaos. The disciplinary space appropriate for raising these questions, and meeting their answers in part, seems to be that of psychoanalytic reflections on the search for Self in creative living, playing and a variety of cultural experiences.

These and a host of allied phenomena are grouped together as 'transitional phenomena' in the writings of D.W. Winnicott, a British Pediatrician-Psychoanalyst — a hyphenated identity. A little later, however, I might be in a position to persuade the reader to overlook the hyphen wherever he sees one, without necessarily falling into the chasm that opens up.

At another level, one may raise questions of a different order which focus on the issue of the relationship between illusions, experiences, and the construction of reality. For example, one may wonder how the human infant, so palpably dependent on a caretaking maternal environment, is nevertheless able to grow from apperception to

perception to form, finally, objective conceptions? How is the external world, with all its reality, established for the growing human being in the first place? Ever so vulnerable in its hold, how does this external reality keep bouncing up for the infant such that the reality not only appears as a menacing impingement, but also as a quintessential, even useful, surround? How is my SELF created in that variable co-relation of permeability with this external reality? And by whom? Aren't there occasions/phases when 'I' loses all its sense of self and hides deep down behind its own denial? Is the denial itself some form of self as well? Winnicott, already well loved within the confines of the clinic, is only recently being addressed for understanding the social yarn around these questions.

Among the various concepts analyzed by Winnicott, I hope to illustrate primarily the ideas of playing and the transitional object to generate some clarity on the vexing questions of tradition and change. I will suggest that the apparently remote concerns of constructions of self and reality by the human infant offer some clues to these *social questions* as well. This is one of the exciting developments from recent work.

Much change, in more than one sphere, has happened around us in urban India in the last few decades. This change has many facets and features; so many in fact that, at times, we tend to ignore the more recent facets but remember instead the (nostalgia-filled) ones of the past. Did we co-savour these with a collectivity unobtrusively present?

When we start remembering and dimensionalizing the change, *it is often done from within a frame of value judgement*: Is the change for the good? Does it lead us to some livable—preferably, *imaginatively livable*—future? Or does it open up some illusory, seductive images which, without our knowing, uproot us from a past that we wished to believe could never be lost? These are some of the deceptively simple

questions that the features of change hide, or carry along their margins.

Transitional Phenomena: Discourse

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How do we form a significant discourse around these questions? If we do not take the chaotic message of these questions for granted, we have a chance of creating some haunting, yet alive, images around them, even as we are inexorably hurled towards some chaos on the way. We may resist while we fall. We may not allow the cynic to rub off all the space and form in-between on the overbearing continuum of change and chaos. We may remain distraught, yet refuse to concede to the ever-threatening appearance of the mad element, cling to our undersides and backs, that we keep pushing to some invisible nooks from where, we hope, it won't show up. We may detest distractions which remind us of the subtle nostalgic pain wedged between us and the host of tantalizing images that the change has spawned.

The change, in any disciplinary sense, refers minimally to a set of two images stirred up as a comparison/contrast: between tradition and modernity, between past and present, between generations, and so on. For a more complete perspective from the point of view of psychoanalysis, the opposition between these pairs, as well as their relationship, needs to be juxtaposed. Extending this idea, a sophisticated analysis will require the positing of relationships at least at the following four levels: at the inner levels of each of the members of the dyad, i.e., *within*

tradition and *within* modernity, as well as at their outer levels, where each member becomes an object to the other as a part of some shared reality. Moreover, at each level, another layer of complexity is engendered when we take into account the processes of communication and relationship that arise between the subject and the object—between any Self and an Other.

Normally it can be taken for granted that humans, while adjusting and adapting to a new set of circumstances, are working towards some understood aims or are taking their time to emerge more accomplished so as to assert their claim of having arrived. What prompts us to invoke the language of transition in these cases—whether to an individual or a group, or to more abstract systems like disciplines and even cultures? How do we provide the coordinates of space and time as demanded by the term 'transition'? With what cognizance have we positioned ourselves, benevolently or vigilantly, to monitor and intervene the change, if the transitional processes are not progressing satisfactorily on their tracks?

Admittedly, it is more difficult to assess these questions in the context(s) of the Indian society. I come across two prominent ideas regarding the changing patterns in our society in the social scientific literature, or their popular versions as reproduced in the media. The first employs a facile frame of projecting the entire society on a chronological scale.

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Take, for example, the grand celebration of the 50th year of our

national independence which is supposed to serve as a milestone both for the ambiguous change undergone in the preceding period and the one likely to be engaged in in the next slab of a five-year plan. In my estimation, this frame is too far removed from an attitude of assessing the processes of transition. Being an attitude of celebration, it is inherently amnesic to the acuter moments of struggle and, as such, it euphorically considers all of these moments as vanquished.

The second idea is more benevolently poised to the idiom of transition. It uses the idiom to facilitate the softening of all obstacles, to raise the hope that the divinity (or, for that matter, some ideology) overseeing this change has provided us with an eternal license to *remain* transitional. To me, it appears that much chaos, seeming as well as real, can be contained and organized, somewhat purposefully, by this characterization of a perpetually transitional society. However, it is difficult to apply *this* notion of transition to larger groups since it misses the problem of how *identifying* patterns are formed in the inner imagination of groups. How do we draw some valid evaluation of the change, happening not only outside but also getting internalized, if we do not have a vantage point?

The Baby and the Breast

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Winnicott was the first to demonstrate what in retrospect seemed so self-evident. 'Show me a baby alone', he is said to have playfully remonstrated with an audience, emphasizing that the mother is bound to be around, and closeby, or else she has kept the baby such, trusting some combination of divine and technological elements to take care of her baby in her temporary absence. 'Taking care' would mean, initially, that no change would invade the baby, and render a chaos, either from without or from within the baby. We are entitled of course to talk about the *within* and the *without* only from the mother's vantage point: for the baby, these are meaningless. His body is as much a part of the world as anything else. Where does he live?

And *where* does he experience all his intense experiences of pleasure, of relaxation, and of pain? These are all extreme transitions, with their attendant disarray, unless swiftly and devotedly converted into lived moments, for the infant, by the ingenuity of the mother.

At the start, the able mother's adaptation to her infant is nearly in unison as she actively creates a condition of illusion for the infant that her 'breast' is a part of him and under his magical control (the term 'breast' stands for infant care in general, both for the active elements involved, as well as the arrangement of the relaxed settings for the well cared states). The initial living of the infant is more a living-*loving* experience.

Winnicott formulates this first moment of living-and-loving as the one coming out of the mother's special capacity 'to produce the breast exactly where the infant has created it'; thereby affording the baby an experience of magical omnipotence. What he keenly needed became a reality, as the mother provided without intruding or claiming anything for herself, and the baby savoured the produce of the 'breast' as well as the grand creation of it in the external reality.

From our point of view, the baby is into an illusion. Winnicott would say that without this illusion the baby has no chance to be initiated into the realm of experience, and then to graduate into health. In Winnicott's language, in the earliest life of the infant in the care of a devoted mother, 'omnipotence is nearly a fact of experience'. The reality external to the couple (i.e., the mother and the infant), however, doesn't always make it possible for the mother to be so exclusively available for the infant. The infant is left to fend on his own.

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Yet, what has the infant created to deserve the use of the description: 'his own?' At first the infant doesn't know what is to be created; subsequently, in what are considered to be the first tensions of a search for a loving-needing experience, the infant manages to produce an image of the mother so subjectively

conceived that it may well be considered a hallucination; *except*, with the critical difference, that no society considers its babies to be mad, or schizoid, just because they happen to create things where there are none. Rather, each society provides for the possibility of living the fiction, and even loving it.

The second task of the mother is that of gradually disillusioning the child out of this state of magical omnipotence. Winnicott has produced a momentous contribution here by emphasizing an observation so commonplace: the transitional objects. The reference is to the stage in the life of almost every infant/child when he develops a special relationship to a particular object from within his surround. Between the ages of four months to about eighteen months, we witness that the child may create his doll, his teddy-bear, his pillow, or his lullaby which he needs to possess in a manner that his caretaker knows and grants to be of vital value. The child needs it to be taken everywhere that he visits. At other moments, like the time of sleeping or in some cases of separation from the mother, the child demonstrates complete control over it. He plays with it actively in the sense of cuddling, excited loving, and even mutilating it. While all of this is going on, the object must survive all this and not change, unless changed by the infant himself.

It comes from without from our point of view, but not from the point of view of the baby. And it does not come from within either, for it is not a hallucination. Finally, a word is in order on the fate of the transitional object:

In health the transitional object does not go inside nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression. It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between inner psychic reality and the external world as perceived by two persons in common, that is to say, over the whole cultural field. At this point the subject widens into that of play and of artistic creativity and appreciation, and of religious feeling and of dreaming, and also of fetishism, lying and stealing, the origin and loss of affectionate feeling, drug addiction, the talisman of obsessional rituals, etc.

Another very critical aspect of this

object that Winnicott emphasizes is the existence of a paradox, stated thus: 'Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated'. And yet the mother has an important task cut out for her — that of disillusioning her child gradually and sensitively to a progressive acceptance of the external reality by an experience of it through the transitional objects.

Transitional Objects: Generalized

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This task, as none harbours any illusion about it, is never complete. The more we grow, the more we learn to accept that illusion is an eternal feature of life so much so that Winnicott puts it as 'the basis of initiation of the experience'. Thus, the transitional phenomena have one end suspended in the realm of illusion and the other anchored in (a very clearly external) reality. All later phenomena which generate intensity unto their own, like religious experience, artistic experience, mystical experience, and more pervasively, the very cultural experience, are modeled after the transitional objects. One needs to create a special emphasis for a comparable notion like Self as well: self-experience may well be a process of creating a transitional object. All of these are neither outside the individual nor inside him: Winnicott's suggestion is that transitional objects constitute a third (potential) space and, moreover, an intermediary level of experience is required to grasp the phenomena in this space.

These statements are regnant with multiple meanings, not all of which can be developed here for obvious limitations of space. Yet the common links among the phenomena of playing, artistic creativity, religious experience, and finally, cultural experiences, could be highlighted to assist in the understanding of our critical inquiries. In all of these phenomena we are witnessing a

process of absorption, a dimension of concentrated participation, and a critical feature of varying degrees of *unself-awareness*. Thus it cannot be said about these states that these are either taking place in some inner psychic realities, or in a clear location of some external kind, where the rules derived from outside of the subjects' control are to be adhered to.

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It would be fairer to suggest that the attitude typical of the process of creative playing is of a transitional kind in which, like the baby in the foregoing examples, the subject is actively seeking a fit between a subjective image—a part of me—and an external objective part—the not-me. The exciting quality to be attributed to this magical experience is

that it turns, so precariously, so subtly into an actuality. Since it is in the nature of playing to take up space and time, it is a kind of *doing*. At the same time, it owes its vitality to its successful containment of experience. We may impulsively have a desire to touch the change as if it and us are equally mad so long as we are bereft of the touch and the resultant fusion, howsoever transient.

Why not simply touch it like the baby exactly when it is presented? Purblind as we begin as babes in the arms of cultures viewed here as mothers, would this moment of simple touching transmute itself and echo like a musical note to which we sway inwards, until the illusion takes over that we have taken in what was outside just before the momentous experience of it being touched? And somewhat later few more of such moments settle down the reality that we have an inside as well as an outside. We are required to sleep over it and let it find its own place in the potential space experienced as Self, as real as the DREAM when it opens the gateway to desires and projects of the future on one hand, and equally unreal as the DREAM on the other, because we tend to delete from it the memory and the fact of our sleep, at the end of some fateful moment.

I will sum up the emphases thus:

The analysis of social change in its multiple directions, and its relevance to the growing individual, continues to be a concern for many disciplines. The discipline of psychoanalysis which uses the dimension of the inner, subjective experience of the individuals for the analysis and understanding of these phenomena has a role to play.

The issues raised in this article have a special bearing on how the experiences of change become real and are felt. For this purpose the concept of transitional phenomena as propounded by D.W. Winnicott has been availed.

This concept flocks together many such experiences which do not find a place exclusively in either the inner reality or the external reality; instead these span a third potential space which is no less real.

The third space arises due to the presence of some caretaking image (or idea or relationship) in a manner such that the individual feels a sense of mandatory omnipotence over things and processes around him for a brief period before gradually losing it through a process of playing, followed by shared playing, and ultimately extending it to cultural experience.

Observations on the phenomena of transitional objects of young children have been collated in some detail to elaborate the paradoxical experiences of illusion and use of objects, so that experiences become actual and the awareness of an external reality gets established. (No details have been taken up for those infants for whom this process doesn't materialize because they can't make the proper transition away from the caretaking figures; these children need help).

Finally, as a tribute to the memory of Winnicott, I raise the question of margins and suggest that other questions hang from the margins of these. Margins are important as a way of demonstrating that ends never really end, except into some further beginnings which are conceived in the subjective imaginations in a manner as if they came from nowhere else except through the creative processes of the human subjects. Winnicott would have liked us to develop the capacity to accept this paradox much in the image of a devoted mother.

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CONFERENCE

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A three-day seminar on *Literary and Cultural Criticism in India* was organised by the IAS on 4-6 November 1997 at Shimla. V.S. Rama Devi, the Governor of Himachal Pradesh, inaugurating the seminar espoused the concept of criticism as a fearless exercise of the humanist

The Critical Tradition

spirit, relevant to one's society. Makarand Paranjpe introduced the role of the Indian critic thematically in terms of various dualities such as tradition vs. modernity, east vs. west, and left vs. right.

Some papers highlighted general theoretical issues. In the inaugural paper on 'Criticism and the Cunning of Reason', Bijoy H. Borua argued that there was no clear answer to the question whether a fixed set of canons acted as the fulcrum of critical understanding. This is because critical practice itself is 'essentially contested and interminably renewed', especially when its own fundamental concepts and methods are continually questioned. Shyamal Bagchee in 'History of Art and Art Criticism' exposed the methodological constraints within recent historicist studies of modern Indian art which take cognisance of

political issues, history of ideas, 'and even the sociology of taste' but overlook the history of criticism. TRS Sharma in an evocatively titled essay, 'Where Windows Become Mirrors: An Encounter of Two Cultures', described the confrontation of two cultures, the Sanskrit and Tamil, and the synchronic reflection of consolidated images.

Several papers focused on specific literary figures. Udaya Kumar's paper 'Kuttikrishna Marar and the Foundation of Taste' discussed the ambivalent position of this Malayali writer as he negotiated between two traditions: the western and the Indian. As a critical insider, Marar dealt with the Sanskrit tradition, but his primary focus was the negotiation between the aesthetic and the ethical. Ramesh Chandra Shah discussed the well-known Hindi writer Ajneya who was both a

pioneer of the modernist movement in Hindi literature and, paradoxically, a subtle defender and interpreter of tradition. E.V. Ramakrishnan's 'Reading Against the Grain: A. Balakrishna Pillai and the Reception of European Modernity' pleaded for a greater recognition of this writer as editor, translator, literary critic and social commentator who exerted a secularising and modernising influence on the reading public in Kerala. Vir Bharat Talwar in 'Kabir Par Kabze ki Ladai' spoke of the upper caste attempts to appropriate dalit saint-poets such as Kabir, which is now being challenged by dalit critics.

With the commendable exceptions just noted, there was a general feeling of the absence of vigorous critical traditions in literature and the arts in India.

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