Exploring Power and Identity in Liminal Spaces in Kapka Kassabova's *Border: A Journey to The Edge of Europe*

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Abstract

Travel writing has a long history dating back to early modern European colonial era in the 16th century. However, in the 21st century the role of travel writing is redefined and reconceptualized as the world becomes more globalized and connected. This paper attempts to investigate further the potential of travel writing to represent social, historical, and political issues. Using textual analysis, the research focuses on the discourses of power and identity as depicted in Kapka Kassabova's *Border: A Journey to The Edge of Europe* (2017). The portrayal of border zones as liminal spaces is also discussed in this paper. The analysis shows that liminal spaces can be interpreted as the sites where power and identity are constantly challenged and negotiated. It reveals that liminal spaces are hardly neutral but contain ideological conflicts. It is expected that the result of the study will contribute a new perspective to the discussion of contemporary travel writing, especially in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: Borders, identity, liminal spaces, power, travel writing

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INTRODUCTION

During the colonial era, many European explorers and traders recorded their observation of the new land and people in a form of travelogue. These travelogues have been analyzed through various critical perspectives, one of which is postcolonialism that examines the representation of the East by Western explorers in their travel writing. For a long time, travel writing has been criticized of being complicit in spreading colonial ideologies (Youngs, 2013); however, in the 21st century, travel writing is redefined and reconceptualized as globalization and mobility increase. The social and cultural background of travel writers becomes more diverse, challenging the male, imperial narrators in traditional travel writing (Jatschka et al., 2019). In addition, influenced by digital advancement, the 21st century travel writers are experimenting with varied forms and narrative devices (Korte & Sennefelder, 2022).

This research discusses further the potential of travel writing to depict social, historical, and political issues in certain areas. The data are taken from a travel memoir Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe by Kapka Kassabova, a Bulgarian poet residing in Scotland. Published in 2017, the memoir won the Saltire and Stanford-Dolman Book of the Year and was shortlisted for prestigious book awards such as the Baillie-Gifford and the American National Circle of Critics Award. Border is Kassabova's personal account of traveling to the border zones between her homeland Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece. With her poetic style and exquisite sensory details, she observes the lives of people inhabiting the border zones while providing the socio-historical background of the areas.

Using textual analysis, this paper will focus on the discourses of power and identity as depicted in Border. Identity is also a significant issue in Border since border zones are usually where different aspects of cultures collide, interact, and amalgamate. Another point of discussion in this paper is the concept of liminal spaces: more specifically, how border zones are portrayed as liminal spaces. The result of this research can contribute a new perspective to the discussion of contemporary travel writing, especially in the post-pandemic era when borders between countries are gradually opened and people start traveling again.

There are many labels to refer to travel writing over the last few years. Critics use terms like 'travel narrative', 'travel journal', 'travelogue' or 'travel literature' to refer to any fictional or non-fictional writing that highlights the theme of traveling to and exploring new places. Borm argues that travel writing is actually not a genre, but instead a 'collective term for a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is traveling' (Borm, 2016). Another perspective emphasizes that travel writing is a hybrid genre. It juxtaposes elements of memoir, itineraries, historical writing, and fiction. Meanwhile, Cooke believes that travel writing in essence contains autobiographical dimension (Cooke, 2016). In forms of expression, it can be said that travel writing is unlimited (Sofi, 2021).

Another significant concept for this research is liminality. The word 'liminal' is derived from a Latin word limen, which means 'threshold'. Originally, liminality is a concept coined by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his book Les Rites de Passage (1909), but then it is used in other disciplines such as geography, architecture, and psychology to refer to 'an intermediate or transition between to states, conditions or regions' (Ng & Lim, 2018). It also signifies a point 'at which choices and decisions must be made in order to move on' (Chakraborty, 2016). Furthermore, Horvath et al. argues it is important to understand the transformative significance of liminality as part of social and political issues in contemporary world (Horvath et al., 2015).

The term 'liminal space' refers to the spatial aspect of liminality; however, in describing social phenomenon, it may also represent a period of social transition and transformation. Specifically, in postcolonial perspective, the concept is used to describe a situation of being on the border, an 'in-between' space in which cultural change may happen (Ashcroft, 2013). Homi K. Bhabha further explores this point by stating that liminal spaces are characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, and potential for subversion and change (Chakraborty, 2016). The discourse of liminality in postcolonialism can be applied to physical places which have had postcolonial experience, such as marketplaces, seashores, geographical borders, and other kinds of thresholds. The concepts of liminality and liminal spaces are used in this paper to analyze the portrayal of border zones in the travel memoir Border and how the zones represent conflicts of power and identity.

METHODS

To discuss the problem formulation of this research, qualitative approach that focuses on textual analysis will be applied. The main data source is Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe by Kapka Kassabova, a travel memoir published in 2017 by Granta. Analysis will pay particular attention to authorial description, characters, setting, and dialogues. Then, the elements will be discussed using theories and concepts from secondary sources such as books and scholarly articles. Through the combination of Cultural Studies and Postcolonial perspective, the analysis aims to investigate the issues of power and identity in liminal spaces, as depicted in the travel memoir Border. First, it examines how the border zones between Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece are portrayed as liminal spaces. The next step of analysis then identifies and reveals the issues of power and identity in liminal spaces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kapka Kassabova was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, but then due to the political turbulences in her homeland, she and her family migrated to New Zealand where she lived for twelve years. In the introduction to *Border*, Kassabova stated that

her journey back to Bulgaria is to see the forbidden places of her childhood, 'the once-militarised border villages and towns, rivers and forests that had been out of bounds for two generations' (Kassabova, 2017). In addition, she said that she is curious to see 'the people of a terra incognita' (xvii). Terra incognita, Latin for 'unknown land', is a term usually used in cartography for areas that have not been documented. Kassabova uses this term to refer to border zones, signifying unfamiliarity and marginality of the areas. In fact, border zones are very often far from the center; they stay in the periphery.

One of the border zones Kassabova visited during her nostalgic journey is Strandja, a mountain massif in southeastern Bulgaria and the European part of Turkey. She describes Strandja as a liminal space, where the environment is desolate and unsettling: … *you knew you'd entered in when the traffic suddenly stopped and the forest engulfed you. The road became broken and muffled in jungle green, and the green was full of mossy lagoons and megalithic rock sanctuaries once used in Dionysian cults* (p. 13). Kassabova uses poetic expressions to depict the natural environment of Strandja 'the forest engulfed you', but at the same time, an ancient atmosphere is also shaped by the words 'megalithic' and 'Dionysian cults'. The eerie effect is further emphasized in this quote: *Vertigos of velvet, a folded world, as if you had to take a plunge in order to emerge on the other side of the abyss* (p. 13). Through her dictions, Kassabova builds the atmosphere of border zones as an eerie and isolated landscape.

The liminality of border zones can also be observed on how Strandja is now occupied only by eight thousand people, mostly elderlies. The border villages in Turkish side of Strandja are also mostly unoccupied. During the Cold War, the villagers were forbidden to leave the border zone and needed a special stamp from the government to stay. However, after the fall of communism, many of the young people then decided to leave the periphery and find education and careers in cities near the center. The emptiness of Strandja is further portrayed in this quote: *Wilderness closed over the land as if after an apocalypse* (p. 21). Bulgaria accelerated the process industrialization between 1944 and 1989, but the result did not reach the border areas: *But with all this industrious activity going on, border villages and towns were drained of their lifeblood* (p. 21). Modernization was targeted only to the people living in the center, not the people living in the border zones.

Thrace is also a notable border zone in *Border*. Located in Southeast Europe, it is now divided among Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. For a long time, Thrace has been a territory of political tensions. As stated by Kassabova, Thrace was'the point where one ideology stopped and another began' (p. 123). As a liminal space, Thrace is depicted as a site of ambiguity: … *the Thracian plain had become of a hub of entrepreneurs and consumers, desperados and smugglers. At the checkpoint between Europe and Asia, the fallen leviathan of a communist-era factory was twinned by a shiny giant mosque* (p. 123). The communist-era factory and the shiny giant mosque are not just buildings, but they represent two different ideologies. In Thrace, the two buildings exist side by side, marking the ambiguous identity of the area. Christopher Tilley stated that landscape is not an inert place; in fact, it contains 'personal biographies, social identities, and memories of previous movements' (Iles, 2012), and the depiction of Thrace seems to fit this definition.

Throughout her journey, Kassabova encountered villagers living in the shadowy border zones. Living far from the center, these people were 'othered', but at the same time, the government required them to keep the geographical borders. In other occasions, she also met survivors running away from the conflicts in their country and trying to cross the border. Crossing the border itself is a brave act of challenging the authority, also sometimes resulting in unexpected consequences. In the archives of the Bulgarian Interior Ministry, there are 415 missing foreign tourists. Although they were recorded as tourists, most of them tried to cross the Bulgarian borders for safety and economy reasons. Even though border zones are liminal, they are the places where the states extremely exercise their power. In Kassabova's words, it is 'where power suddenly acquires a body, if not a human face, and an ideology*'* (p. xvi).

The issue of identity occurs in the border zones as liminal spaces. An 'othering' process

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appears where the people living in the boundaries are marginalized, far from the mainstream sight. Also, cultural changes occur in the border territory, sometimes in a coercive way. This phenomenon is depicted by Kassabova when she met the Pomaks in 'the village where you lived for ever' (the real name of the village is concealed). The Pomaks are descendants of Bulgarian Christians who had to convert to Islam during the Ottoman rule, and in Bulgaria they were seen as having a double identity. They were Slavs, but also Muslims. After the fall of the communist regime, the Pomaks continued to be marginalized by the government. In order to be admitted as Bulgarians, some of the Pomaks were even re-Christianised. As the situation escalated, they rejecting to convert decided to flee to Turkey. To maintain their cultural and religious identity, they had to cross the borders. Borders here mark not only division of areas, but also differences of identity.

In one of the mining villages, Kassabova was introduced to a man from the minority group. Hairi is a retired miner who had to change his name twice, following the government's program to assimilate the Pomaks into Bulgarian society. He changed his name to a less Arabic one Hari in the 1970s and later to a fully Slavicised Zakhari. Despite the name-changing campaign, Hairi admitted that he never used the other names. For the people who knew him, he was still Hairi. He did not even show any bitterness toward this coercive assimilation, "At least you could choose the name by which your identity was destroyed" (p. 225). The Pomaks are the people trapped between two identities, and the government forced them to choose one over the other. This is one example of many cases when your identity is determined by the authority.

To emphasize identity conflicts in the border areas, in some parts of her travel memoir, Kassabova also applies binary oppositions. For example, in the chapter 'To the River' she lists down the contrasts between Bulgaria and Turkey: *In Turkey, the state supported and smothered you. In Bulgaria, you were abandoned to your misfortunes, but you could buy vodka and skinny-dip without being arrested* (p. 325). In addition, she observes how the countries now are switching identities: *You could say that once-capitalist Turkey and once-communist Bulgaria had swapped boots, as true neighbours do* (p. 325). An interesting aspect is that, even though she is a Bulgarian, Kassabova tends to take a neutral stance in seeing the differences between these two countries. Her narratives do not show any hint of exoticizing Turkey (or any foreign country), a perspective often adopted by the colonial travel writers.

In the end, Kassabova's journey to the border areas has inspired her to do self-reflection about her own identity. When having dialogues with the people living in the borders, she reflects about her own roots. As a Bulgarian who spends most of her life in New Zealand and Scotland, she highlights the important connection between place and identity: *It's precisely when you have lost your roots that everywhere you go matters hugely*. (p. 77). Furthermore, Kassabova mentions that if she cannot live in Bulgaria, at least she can die there: buried in her homeland.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the travel memoir *Border* emphasizes that borders are not just geographical, but also social and political. It is where one state is divided from the other, and it is actively policed to make sure no one can cross it illegally. Kassabova portrays border zones as liminal spaces: a territory with an eerie and unsettling atmosphere. However, it is revealed that as liminal spaces, border zones are not neutral. In fact, these are the sites where power and identity are constantly challenged and negotiated. Identity issue becomes more complex in the marginalized border zones, as the people live in stasis and transition at the same time.

In the post-pandemic era, the borders between countries are gradually opened. People will have the opportunity to travel across the borders again for various purposes. Based on this situation, travel writing can offer a relevant insight into these movements and the socio-cultural changes that occur along with them. Leaving behind its colonial background, travel writing now has the power to portray the marginalized and promote voices from the periphery.

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