

In Want of an Identity:  
Appetite, Liminality and Death Symbolism in Wendy Law-Yone's *The Road to Wanting*.

Na Ga, the narrator of the novel *The Road to Wanting* undergoes a crisis upon arriving at the Burmese border. Having had a traumatic life, she struggles to find an identity and a sense of well-being. Na Ga stalls in Wanting, enduring a prolonged state of liminality marked by sleeplessness, swings in appetite and suicidal thoughts. This essay explores the symbolic functions of hunger and death in relation to her liminal state, and seeks to explain their role in the narrator's quest for agency. How kinship is manifested in the novel and its connection to appetite is also discussed, specifically through the author's use of minor characters as extensions of the protagonist's self. In analysing the narrator's attempted suicide, Turner's theory of liminality and Schopenhauer's theory of the will-to-live will be employed, demonstrating the author's pantheistic use of religious concepts such as self-sacrifice.

Arriving in the unquiet of Wanting, overtired and racked by portentous dreams, Na Ga is neither properly awake nor able to sleep; a state which she conjectures as being akin to death (Law-Yone 40-45). She faces a choice: to continue the journey back to her homeland, a journey not of her choosing, or to end it in this chaotic, liminal space by committing suicide. The crux of her problem is a lack of agency (having never had control over her own life) and a loss of identity due to the series of displacements she has suffered thus far (Law-Yone 5). The lack of agency is represented in the novel as her sense of imprisonment or lack of freedom, while the loss of identity is demonstrated through the blurring of distinctions between herself and the characters she interacts with in the town of Wanting. The town figures physically as a border and symbolically as a threshold; a place of *anatta* or "no self" (Law-Yone 57). In Buddhist teaching *anatta* is a flow of consciousness in which the self has no place. Desire creates the illusion of self. The sense of having a self leads inevitably to self interest, and thus to *doukha*, or suffering. Giving up the self also means giving up desire, thus putting an end to suffering (Leaman 17). Victor Turner's elaboration of the death-like nature of liminality is useful for understanding the narrator's physical and mental condition in 'Wanting'. It helps to explain how limbo is established in the novel as a necessary condition for acquiring identity and self-determination.

The anthropologist Victor Turner extended Van Gennep's notion of the liminal phase of rituals (Turner 1969 and van Gennep 1960). The rite of passage into adulthood, for example, is proposed as central to social status. A child can only become an adult by undergoing the pain of separation from their own childhood, whereby an old identity is shed and a new one assumed. The liminal space in ritual is the middle stage, or space, between the former and latter states of being. It is a space of uncertainty, chaos and loss, giving rise to experience and renewal. Turner describes a shared sentimental effect that the status change can have on members of a community, highlighting the importance of liminal processes to the production of community and kinship bonds (cf. Turner 116). Turner also notes the ambiguity of the liminal zone. He describes people on the threshold between a former, lower status and a higher one as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 95). This blurring of distinctions may be expressed in various ways, one being symbolically as death (Turner 95). Thus Na Ga, in her liminal state, can be thought of as being akin to the living dead. The narrator has lost familial, cultural and locational knowledge and is in want of a culturally stable and genealogically traceable identity. The very fluidity of Na Ga's selfhood equates to an ambiguity in her status as living, enabling the author to exploit a slippage between life and death as well as between specific characters populating the liminal zone of the border town. Liminality in the novel can be ascribed to the physical space of Wanting as a place on a threshold, to the consciousness of the protagonist in her crisis, and to the temporality of the novel, oscillating chapter to chapter between the narrative past and present. Leaving 'Wanting' in the narrational present of the final chapter, Na Ga crosses the physical border into Burma, and thus symbolically crosses into a new state of being, a state of 'Not Wanting' (Law-Yone 261). Yet the liminal state of being itself plays a role in her empowerment, not just the act of leaving it behind. For it is through choosing to attempt suicide that Na Ga demonstrates the power of her will, just as surviving the attempt leaves a way out of the borderland open. Ironically (and neatly, so far as the application of Schopenhauer's thought to the novel is concerned), the vector for change in Na Ga's appalling life is the aptly named Will, an American sensualist possessing not only freedom and power, but also propriety. However, meeting Will affects only a change of circumstance: it is the narrator's symbolic death<sup>1</sup> in Wanting that brings agency.

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<sup>1</sup> Although it would be unfeasible to conduct a Lacanian analysis on top of everything else, it is interesting to note that the Symbolic order is linguistic. The one item of value the protagonist has on hand to offer the beggar is a jade pen.

Schopenhauer's concept of the will-to-live is useful for understanding both the role suicide plays in the novel and why the protagonist's appetite waxes and wanes. Based on a mixture of Buddhist and Hindu theology (Singh, *Perplexed* 93), will is equivalent to unthinking, all-consuming desire (or want) for the continuation of existence and material satisfaction. Schopenhauer suggests that the satisfaction of wants is "inseparable from the existence of the body" and that the very normalcy of this desire for life blinds us to the pain and dissatisfaction it generates (Schopenhauer, *Will* Vol. 1 473). He celebrates quests to go beyond the will-to-live (the renunciation of worldly desire) as an act of moving on to a higher plain of existence. This is reminiscent of the liminal phase of status transformation outlined by Turner. But whereas liminality is only a death-like phase, Schopenhauer's philosophy arrives at the contemplation of suicide as a reasonable alternative to living:

[...] to die willingly, to die gladly, to die cheerfully, is the prerogative of the resigned, of him who gives up and denies the will-to-live. For he alone wishes to die actually and not apparently, and consequently needs and desires no continuance of his own person. He willingly gives up the existence that we know; what comes to him instead of it is in our eyes nothing, because our existence in reference to that one is nothing. The Buddhist faith calls that existence *nirvana*, that is to say, extinction. (Schopenhauer, *Will* Vol. 3 340)

This is an endorsement of suicide as an end to suffering, but only in the context of the liminal transformation of the self. Life is figured as a state of limbo which the renunciation of desire can transcend. At first glance, Na Ga's dilemma seems to echo this: in chapter one she is poised on the brink of annihilation and release, only to be pulled back into anxiety and doubt. The attempt to take her own life requires immense will-power, which is itself a confirmation of the very will-to-live that Schopenhauer posits as a hindrance to contentedness. This paradox is reflected in the description of the precipitous moment where the intention of the protagonist is rendered ambiguous by the location of the cramp she suffers (as if the noose around her neck was not supposed to kill her), the reference to auto-erotic asphyxia and the suggestion that she is under a spell which can only be broken through the power of her will (Law-Yone 3). Sexual impulses are seen by Schopenhauer as the ultimate expression of the power of the will-to-live in that sex is causally linked to reproduction, the furthering of the species and ultimately the continuation of misery (Schopenhauer, *Will* Vol. 3 478). According to both Schopenhauer and Buddhist theology, to attain freedom the will-to-live must be subdued (Buswell 62). Paradoxically, Na Ga exerts will power in an attempt to overcome the will-to-live, but is thwarted when Minzu knocks on the door with news of Jiang's own suicide

(Law-Yone 4). The coincidence of the attempts will be returned to once the relationship between Na Ga and Jiang has been further explored.

Ostensibly it is her discovery of self worth and the ability to empathise that propels Na Ga out of limbo, but this is brought on by Jiang's own denial of the will-to-live, or suicide, and the revelation of his identity as a member of her own ethnic group (Law-Yone 244). The revelation is a transformational moment for Na Ga, resembling the biblical parable of the blind man whose vision is restored after bathing (John 9:11). Upon reading the letter from Jiang, Na Ga declares, "How could I have been so blind?" Minzu then arrives to discover Na Ga's eyes inflamed from crying, and suggests they wash in the river. Once in, the water is "relentless in its ministrations", curing hurt. The cold water wraps her in "a swirling embrace", opening her eyes to the possibility of change: "The wound, after all, is mostly in the mind" (Law-Yone 247). The particular connection between the river's healing power and Jiang lies in his name, which can be translated from Chinese as 'general', 'stubborn' or as 'river'. Perhaps not entirely coincidental is the fact that Jiang is a surname used by some Lahu people living around the border between Shan State and Yunnan Province (Jianxiong 44). Jiang's other name is Ai Sha, strikingly similar to the name E Sha, a demigod worshipped by the Lahu (Jianxiong 60). Indeed, it is in this very region that the "miraculous Utopia" of Xishuangbanna, where Jiang goes to die, is located. Na Ga enquires as to the nature of the trip:

'Business?' I asked. 'Or pleasure?'

He gave me one of his rheumy-eyed smiles that made him seem as if he was smiling through tears. 'Both,' he replied. (Law-Yone 219)

Jiang signals the relief that death will bring, but also the sacrifice. He is crying and smiling; both happy and sad to be relinquishing life in favour of *anatta*. The corollary of this is that Jiang can be understood as directly comforting Na Ga with his "swirling embrace" while simultaneously manifesting the protagonist's self, released from its corporeal confines. The symbolism of the flowing river mixes Buddhist and Christian traditions. Na Ga and Minzu are amidst the liminal flow of *metta* (unconditional kindness) and of Jiang's soul on its way home: a soul flowing back to Burma and into to the mind-changing power of the "Mother Irrawaddy" (Law-Yone 247).

In taking his own life Jiang acts as a surrogate for Na Ga, freeing her to find an alternative way out of her crisis. Such a deed could be understood as sacrificial. Buswell, for example, notes the role of sacrifice in Buddhist theology:

In accordance with the principle that the body has no intrinsic value, but gains value through the manner in which it is used, Buddhists extol the practice of offering one's body to others

out of compassion. Tales of the former lives of the Buddha narrate many occasions in which the Buddha-to-be offered his flesh to starving animals at the expense of his life. (Buswell 65)

Thus we can place self-sacrifice as a notion within Buddhist thought and find a correspondence in chapter 12, when a tired, emaciated and frantic Jiang exclaims, “Just imagine! [...] A bodhisattva gains enlightenment, gains release from the cycle of living and dying, but throws itself back into the world of suffering. All out of compassion for those still caught there” (Law-Yone 75). This presages his death as a return to the cycle of life on behalf of Na Ga. Self-sacrifice requires both agency and letting go of the will-to-live.

Na Ga first meets Jiang in front of posters displaying the execution of prisoners. According to Jiang, various petty criminals have been sacrificed theatrically to give the impression that the Chinese government is tough on drug smugglers. He then asks her whether she can recognise him as a fellow Burmese (Law-Yone 20). The sacrifice of prisoners is referred to again in the next chapter, when Na Ga and Will are reading about the history and traditions of the ‘Wild Lu’. Sacrifice was a part of ‘Lu’ culture (Law-Yone 24). The placing of sacrifice and recognition within the same conversation therefore appears calculated; making it possible for Jiang’s suicide to count as self-sacrifice because he is a fellow ‘Wild Lu’. There is also a reference to the Christian concept of self-sacrifice in chapter twenty-four which anticipates Jiang’s revelatory letter. Daw Daw Seng is explaining the role of angels, or Watchers, to Na Ga, who wishes to know why they look so ordinary. Daw Daw Seng replies that it is because

they’re like us [...] They’re made to look human, so they can show us by example how to be nearer to God [...] but we can’t tell who they are - not until something very big, very unusual, happens. Then we know from their act of charity or sacrifice that we are in the presence of a Watcher. (Law-Yone 177)

The narrator then describes Will as a Watcher, yet both Jiang and Minzu exhibit these characteristics as well. Jiang, for example, is tasked with minding Na Ga until she crosses into Burma. Only when she had all the necessary paperwork and no longer really needed his help did Jiang (the general) finally execute Jiang (the prisoner) with a bullet in the mouth. Na Ga is a prisoner in Wanting as well. Yet with Jiang gone she can recognise her own freedom even if she herself feels trapped (Law-Yone 13). The experience of being trapped in the liminal zone is explored through the association the narrator makes to her childhood occupation as a trapper of eels.

Buddhist mythology has derived a pantheon of spirit beings from preceding animist belief systems (Buswell 467). Prevalent in Burma are the *nats*, or temple spirits, and *nagas*, snake or eel-like creatures associated with fertility and chaos (Buswell 234). The naga/eel motif, incorporated

into Buddhist mythology from pre-existing religions, demonstrates the pantheistic tendencies of the protagonist. One could understand Na Ga as a symbol of the history of Burma, comprising political and religious experience. When Will finds her *naga* belt, the symbolism of her name becomes apparent: rendered infertile and subservient by her enslavement in brothels, she has become the antithesis of a *naga* spirit. The belt, “with the heavy scales and the dragon-head buckle” (Law-Yone 195), is found lying under her bed, like a monster in a child’s nightmare. Indeed, beds feature heavily throughout the novel (referred to in twenty-four of thirty-three chapters), associated as they are with the liminal states of sleep (threshold) and carnality (interpenetration of bodies) as well as with safety. The naga can also be linked to the appetite motif. In the restaurant in Wanting, for example, Na Ga declines to eat the eel dish offered by Yan Ding (Law-Yone 141), ostensibly as it reminds her of her childhood (Law-Yone 36) but also because, in spite of her host’s generous offer of a great many Yunnanese specialties, what she craves is less choice. The choice of dishes is likened to the choice of identity facing Na Ga. So long as she is unable to choose, she will remain in limbo. The narrator is between identities, in want of the sacred knowledge of her true name (Law-Yone 60). She is also between religions, having grown up under the influence of her tribe’s animist belief system at first, and then a mixture of Daw Daw Seng’s Christianity and Mor’s Buddhism (Law-Yone 57- 58). According to Buswell (234), subduing a naga and bringing it into buddhist belief will convert it into an active protector of the religion. This supports the proposition that the narrator, although at times critical of Buddhism, tends nevertheless to follow its tenets, as attested by her passage out of Wanting and into ‘Not Wanting’, which is suggestive of the Buddhist principle of overcoming desire and giving up the self (Law-Yone 261). In Na Ga’s case, relinquishing the self is equivalent to becoming less self obsessed and able to experience empathy.

In *The Road to Wanting* the *naga* is used as a metaphorical representation of the narrator’s liminality. Yet it is the figure of the hungry ghost which is most useful for analysing connections between liminality, appetite and death in the novel. Na Ga’s status as hungry and as a ghost is often mentioned, though hungry ghosts themselves are not. Hungry ghosts (*preta* in Sanskrit) are people who exhibited selfish or uncharitable behaviour in their lifetime and are now destined to remain perpetually hungry and dissatisfied (Buswell 209 and 309). As ghosts they are trapped in limbo; deceased but unable to reach *nirvana* unless assisted by living relatives through temple offerings, at which point they may be reborn into the endless cycle of existence (Buswell 309-310). That cycle is referred to by the narrator in chapter twenty-eight when visiting a hairdressers’. She steps “past the threshold in to a pinkish light”, reminding her of her days trapped in a brothel: “Were these repeated

rinses, this circular tune, reminders of a cycle I'd been caught in for too long, otherwise known as the cycle of existing?"(Law-Yone 223). Before Jiang dies, she has no appetite; the choices available in the buffet overwhelm her, though she puts it down to Jiang's presence (Law-Yone 71). Immediately after his death she is left "racked by appetite" (Law-Yone 69). In the sense that they are one and the same, Na Ga has undergone a symbolic death and is now a ghost, and as a hungry ghost her appetite has a twofold link to her liminality. On the one hand, hunger symbolises liminality through its connection to Buddhist beliefs in the supernatural. On the other hand, and somewhat contradictorily, hunger situates the protagonist as terrestrial and real; to be hungry is to be present. In both senses, hunger is indicative of desire. Na Ga's appetite dwindles after she is drugged and smuggled into Thailand (Law-Yone 113), arguably the point at which the sadness of displacement in childhood gives way to doubly harsh realities in adulthood. From this moment until she reaches Wanting, the references to food and eating are few and not marked by any conspicuous presence or absence of desire. Her lack of appetite only assumes significance on the border (Law-Yone 144).

Appetite is a crucial element in the externalisation of self, and has two divergent yet coexisting significations. The first is the narrator's gradual exit from limbo, by which hunger marks her as present, alive and in possession of will (not Will). The second is her status as not-yet-alive, according to which her hunger is that of a restless, sleepless ghost who cannot achieve satisfaction, is in search of a stable identity. The protagonist's self in the liminal zone is splintered, manifesting alternately as Jiang, Minzu, or the beggar girl. A pertinent suggestion of this is in chapter eight, where the narrator sees herself from a position outside her own body:

We had reached the third-floor landing when I was stopped by the sight of a shadowy figure trailing the girl down the corridor. Then I shook my head to clear it, and saw who it was: myself - none other than my ghostly self. It was only a phantom, a trick of fatigue, and I caught up with my shadow, so to speak, at the door to the last room. (Law-Yone 43)

The passage is ambiguous, suggesting that she is catching up both with her own ghost and with Minzu, without delineating between the two. This hints at the possibility that Minzu is a manifestation of her former child-self, whom she must leave behind. The sixteen-year old Minzu (which translates from standard Chinese as 'minority', 'nation' or 'ethnic') looks after the narrator, worrying over her like a guardian angel (Watcher), or like a relative bringing offerings of food to satiate a hungry ghost (Law-Yone 136-137). Conversely, the narrator is figured as being in an arrested state of development: passionate, selfish and exhibiting child-like behaviour, although by the end of the novel Na Ga seems to be more emotionally stable and growing the ability to

empathise. Meanwhile, Minzu is the happy, innocent counterpart to the troubled Na Ga, as much a part of the narrator's identity as Jiang, albeit never understood by the protagonist as such: "I won't ask myself why we are here in the first place, or who is behind this 'blessing' for Jiang, or what Minzu has to do with it - what I have to do with it" (Law-Yone 203). With its blend of Theravada Buddhism and shamanistic hill-tribe tradition, the blessing for Jiang leaves Na Ga feeling guilty, but not so guilty that she cannot be tempted to leave the temple with Minzu in favour of lunch (Law-Yone 205-206). For now that he has been sacrificed, or has sacrificed himself (like the Buddha or like Christ), her appetite for life is returning. Appetite is significant then as it marks the protagonist both as trapped on the threshold, craving satiation, and as passing over the threshold into an absence of self, or *anatta*.

Jiang and Minzu can be understood as independent characters interacting with Na Ga, but also as projections of her self into the liminal time and space of Wanting. It remains now to explain how the beggar girl is also such a manifestation. Na Ga routinely assuages her appetite at the Burmese tea-shop in the morning. This is the time when ascetic monks would normally break their fast to eat their one meal of the day. On one occasion a beggar tries to get her attention:

I've just about cleaned my plate and drunk my tea to the dregs, when a beggar tugs at my sleeve. *Nothing to eat, no rice, no salt...* A girl, I am guessing, without turning to look. Or a stunted woman. I will not look. (Law-Yone 46)

The narrator is too preoccupied with her own self to want anything to do with the beggar. She is aware of the girl and can describe her, but states that she "will not look". For looking is figured here not just as seeing, but also as recognising. The beggar's appearance and state of health ought to invoke her pity but instead triggers a stream of uncharitable thoughts. When the girl says, "Jiang said go home..." Na Ga feels she is losing her grip on reality (Law-Yone 46). In the liminal space of Wanting, the identity of characters blurs, allowing them to figure both as extensions of Na Ga and as recognisable individuals. Thus the beggar can be a stranger and simultaneously have intimate knowledge of Na Ga's association with Jiang. In chapter ten, Na Ga characterises herself as a beggar, when upon praying to the gods (all of them, but especially the Buddha) she states, "I tried to pray properly, without begging outright. Surely the gods were sick and tired of begging" (Law-Yone 58). Finally, in chapter thirty-three, Na Ga sees the beggar again, but this time their relationship is reversed. Na Ga, now less selfish, confronts the girl and forces eye contact, noting that "her face is a fright: her sores are weeping, her eyes puffy slits" (Law-Yone 255). This is reminiscent of her own appearance after reading the letter from Jiang, her eyes then being inflamed, causing her to squint (Law-Yone 245). Thus the beggar may also be understood as a reflection of Na Ga's self on its

journey to no self. Or better, one piece of a splintered self, like the splintered “watery image” in chapter five (Law-Yone 25) or the “million shattered pieces” of the river in chapter thirty-two, whereby the image of flowing water suggests both the division and co-mingling of attributes (Law-Yone 246).

In light of Na Ga’s origin as a member of the ‘Wild Lu’ it is possible to draw a link between her ethnicity and her liminal status, but not only because it is a fictional tribe, assembled from the traditions and beliefs of many Burmese ethnic minorities. Nor just because she is displaced, stateless, and mentally exhausted, evidence for which is abundant in the text. The ‘Lu’ belief system proposed by the author for Jiang and Na Ga and shared by the Dai (i.e. Minzu), includes the belief that the soul is a butterfly (Law-Yone 135). In the midst of the river’s flow of redemption, Minzu sets out to show Na Ga a place where “you can hear the butterflies sing” (Law-Yone 247). Na Ga drifts downstream on her back like a buoyant soul afloat on the breeze. This moment sees the synthesis and sublimation of animist and Christian belief into an overarching Buddhist narrative. Following Leaman’s description of Theravada Buddhism, Na Ga is represented as having achieved freedom from her past and as having allayed any fear of the future (Leaman 264). She has overcome the cycle of craving and self interest to become a part of the collective flow of consciousness.

Paradoxically, the obscuring of distinctions between the protagonist and specific characters in the border town gives form to the search for identity and empowerment. It is also a way of signalling the importance of kinship relations for the solitary Na Ga: Minzu is of a similar ethnic background, Jiang is a ‘Wild Lu’, and the beggar is also a “stunted woman”; a maligned sufferer in need of aid (Law-Yone 47). Wendy Law-Yone incorporates religious symbolism drawn from animism, Theravada Buddhism and Christianity, all of which actively influence Burmese culture today. The splitting of the protagonist into several characters is a literary device that affords the process of self recognition and progress toward *anatta*. This is the Road to Wanting of the title, whereby the road journey is one on which existential ennui is overcome through the acquisition of agency, itself conferring a sense of identity.

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