

# **The Mayhem of In Between Existence: Decoding Transitional Liminality in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida***

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## **Abstract**

The dynamicity of human life encounters many challenges on the way to its destiny. Such human experiences are complex and diverse, and may occur as predicted, unanticipated and even in the form of non-events. This study examines the transitional liminality of the narrator in the Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* authored by Shehan Karunatilaka and draws parallels between the character's experience of in-betweenness and the existential crises that individuals may face in similar liminal situations. As the novel concentrates on highlighting the civil war situation in Sri Lanka, through the qualitative approaches of interpretation and content analysis, the research analyses and explores the historical aspects of the liminal event using secondary sources. The study proposes that the author's choice to portray the character in a state of in-betweenness reflects the difficulties that individuals face when navigating existential crises during periods of transition in their lives.

**Keywords:** Civil War; Identity; Liminality; Transition.

## **Introduction**

Without a doubt, as has been observed in several conflicts throughout history, wars and riots can cause immense destruction, displacement, alienation, and associated social issues in society. Its long-lasting effects on life forms, involving the use of violence and force to achieve political or social goals (Tilly, 1975), often result in significant economic, social, and political repercussions (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Although reasons may differ, the instability of the system experienced by the state and the people involved would create psychological trauma, deep divisions, and marginalisation

among the citizens even in post-war conditions (Kizilhan, 2017; Tarrow, 1998). If war between countries and with terrorist groups causes infrastructure damage, resource limitations, and increase death tolls, the situation of civil war can cause even more damage to the nation as it is an internal conflict between its citizens. Civil wars around the world in history have had severe negative impacts on the people who were its participants and victims. For example, the Lebanese Civil War lasted from 1975 to 1990 and resulted in significant destruction, displacement, and loss of life. The conflict had a profound impact on the Lebanese society, leading to a breakdown of institutions and infrastructure, economic instability, and sectarian divisions. The war also had regional implications, with neighbouring countries getting involved in the conflict, and the country is still dealing with the aftermath of the war, including political instability and social tensions. Likewise, the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011 resulted in the same consequences where many became refugees and spilt over into neighbouring countries and the conflict has also caused sectarian divisions within the Syrian society, leading to alienation and marginalisation of certain groups (Heydemann, 2013).

A similar but more inclined towards the cultural and linguistic division of people was the Sri Lankan civil war which began in July 1983 and lasted till 2009, had profound implications on the citizens and their living conditions in the country. The conflict between the Sri Lankan government which was dominated by the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil separatist group led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) made the country witness violent clashes, riots, and destruction of infrastructure for the reason that the LTTE sought an independent Tamil homeland in the northern and eastern region of the country. The origins of the problematic situations in the country can be traced to Sri Lanka's colonial era and policies related to postcolonialism that constrained the social and economic rights of the latter group of people (Ganguly, 2018). The conflict resulted in the polarization of the two communities and created a deep sense of mistrust and suspicion between them. The government's victory over the LTTE resulted in the consolidation of power in the hands of the ruling party and a weakening of democratic institutions. The government's approach to reconciliation and justice has also been criticised, and the lack of accountability for war crimes and human rights abuses has led to a continued sense of mistrust and tension between the two communities. It is a fact that linguistic, racial, cultural, ethnic and religious differences among people often lead to such communal conflicts when the extremist ideology seeks to have dominance over the other. The government's heavy-handed approach, which included the use of emergency laws and the military, led

to human rights abuses and violations. These actions were criticised by the international community, and the war became a major point of contention between Sri Lanka and the international community. The Sri Lankan case shows that the infusion of politics and the limitations of unprepared institutions can seriously delay prospects for accountability (Ratner, 2012).

There has been several discussion and debates on the political implications during and post-civil war period in Sri Lanka. However, there would have been people who were forced into the consequences of the war despite having no such extremist ideological stands. For them, the period of the civil war could be a state of uncertainty and anxiety as the result of the war was unpredictable. The Sri Lankan civil war had significant psychological implications for the people, especially those who were directly affected by the brutality and violence involved in it. Studies have shown that individuals who were exposed to the violent situations of the civil war experienced traumatic experiences in the range of anxiety, depression, suicidal tendency, and other psychological wounds (De Jong et al., 2002). In the study conducted on children in north-eastern Sri Lanka who were exposed to the war (Somasundaram, 2002), 92% experienced traumatising events and 25% had post-traumatic symptoms (Elbert et al., 2009). There needs no particular study to understand that people who are victimised to such situations would be affected by prolonged traumatic effects.

Here lies the significance of this research. Apart from the other aspects of the civil war situation, it is the psychological state of people in the country that is more crucial and critical. The psychological well-being of individuals impacted by civil war can affect the overall recovery of the community. When people are struggling with mental health issues, they may be less likely to engage in community activities and initiatives that promote healing and reconciliation. People who have experienced trauma may struggle with forming and maintaining healthy relationships with others. They may have difficulty trusting others, be prone to mood swings and emotional outbursts, and struggle with feelings of isolation.

A decade after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka, a novel that backgrounds the consequences of the civil war, written by Shehan Karunatilaka has received the Booker Prize award for "the ambition of its scope, and the hilarious audacity of its narrative techniques", (Ebrahimi, 2022). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, published in the year 2020 discuss the civil war situation in Sri Lanka from the 1990s in the genre of a metaphysical thriller. Through the narrative of the novel, the author outlines a symbolic

portrayal of the pandemonium affected by the country during the civil war. This research analyses the character development of the narrator in the novel and draws connections between the narrator's experience of being in a transitional and ambiguous state, and the existential challenges that people may have faced during the civil war scenario. Through a qualitative approach using content analysis and interpretation that highlights the psychological status of the victimised people in the civil war, the study examines the historical context of the civil war in Sri Lanka with the help of secondary sources.

There has been little research conducted on the novel, not even based on the previous title *Chat with the Dead* (2020). Nevertheless, certain book reviews popped up after the novel received the Booker prize. The dark and terrifying period of Sri Lanka's history is portrayed from a second-person point of view narration by using sardonic humour and recalls the mordant wit and surrealism of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* or Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (Owolade, 2022). Apart from the second-person narrative style that is a highlight of the novel, there has been a conscious effort to establish an experimental pattern of storytelling that matches George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Though not coincidental, both the novels deal with the purgatory existence of characters where Saunders calls it a bardo which has been derived from the Buddhist traditions on the purgatory stages after death seeking the afterlife. Whereas, Karunatilaka calls it In Between and divides it into stages of seven moons that lead to the ultimate Light. The influence of Kurt Vonnegut can be found in the works of George Saunders where absurd realities, cynicism, and dark humour take a major part (Mathew, 2022). Similar comparisons have been made for black humour as a way to satirise human conduct in the works of Kurt Vonnegut and Karunatilaka (Sipahimalani, 2022).

Despite the articles and reviews praising the novel, there are perspectives of writers who have pointed out how and why the novel has its negative shades. It could be the reason that several publishers rejected commenting on it to be esoteric, confusing, impenetrable, difficult, and also not familiar to Western readers. Hoole (2022) writes about the grammatical mistakes, spelling mistakes, political incorrectness, hate speech, and use of Sinhalese words and Sanskrit evident in the book. Though he mentions it as an excellent book, certain attributes such as dirty, vulgar, politically incorrect and offensive in parts are also addressed. Criticism of the novel cannot be excluded because the observations help to understand the opposing perspectives on the book. It feels that the author got diverted from the focus of the real problems faced by people in the civil war while describ-

ing the exaggerated homosexual characterisations of the characters. Maali is portrayed as open about his sexuality in the novel, which provides a vivid depiction of the gay subculture in both urban Colombo and rural Sri Lanka. However, DD is a character who keeps his sexual orientation hidden, and this ultimately creates serious consequences for him personally and for the political issues addressed in the story's resolution (Devi, 2022). Views on homosexuality vary greatly around the world and are often influenced by cultural, religious, and political factors. Some countries have made significant progress in advancing LGBTQ+ rights, while others still criminalise homosexuality and subject LGBTQ+ individuals to discrimination, harassment, and violence. In many parts of the world, homosexuality is increasingly accepted and celebrated, with greater visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in popular culture and media. This has led to significant advancements in legal rights for LGBTQ+ people, including the legalisation of same-sex marriage and adoption, anti-discrimination protections, and the recognition of gender identity in a few countries. In fact, Sri Lanka has not yet accepted and legalised same-sex relationships even after its neighbouring country, India decriminalised it in the year 2018. It is still a criminal act under Section 365A of the Sri Lankan penal code. Nevertheless, there have been reports that the government of Sri Lanka plans to decriminalise consensual same-sex sexual relationships in the country soon (Lavers, 2023). The political viewpoint on this matter is complex and multifaceted that has not reached any conclusion.

In conducting a content analysis of a novel, themes can be categorised to discuss its different aspects. This research paper will focus on two major themes. The first one is the liminal aspect in relation to the civil war situation presented in the novel and the purgatory stage of the narrator. The second theme is the exploration of the sexual orientation of the characters, including that of the narrator. This aspect of the novel is significant in understanding the characters' motivations and actions. The exploration of sexual orientation in the novel will provide insights into the LGBTQ+ experience and how it is portrayed in literature.

### **Civil War and Purgatory Existence: A Liminal Perspective**

Shehan Karunatilaka's execution to outline the political and social situation of the people in Sri Lanka during the civil war took the support of the narrator's experience as a ghost character in the purgatory stage referred to as the different moon stages. Although it is a trajectorial description of the situations encountered by the narrator immediately after being dead from life as a war photographer to the point of reaching the afterlife

mentioned in the novel as the Light, it integrates certain situations of his life before death. Through several minor and major discoveries and realisations about his death, the second-person narrative used by the author takes the readers to understand the brutality exercised over the victims of the civil war.

Shetellsyouthatshewanderedforathousandmoonsbeforeshefound peace. That many of the victims of the 1983 riots are still roaming the In Between. 'Some walked into The Light. Some became demons, The Light makes you forget. We should never forget'.

(Karunatilaka 2022, p. 61)

The 'she' referred to in the above quote from the novel is a direct victim of the riots during the civil war and speaks to the narrator as a ghost in the purgatory stage. Though identity becomes a question for the ghost characters in purgatory, the author has provided them with their memory of the past to ponder or to forget so as to achieve the Light. The insecurity felt in the In Between is reflected in their thoughts shared by the ghosts referring to the situation of becoming "a yaka or a preta or a ghoul or a slave" (p. 89). The anxiety of the ghosts does not get over with it but continues to express the entrapment as congested, polluting, whispering bad thoughts, and filled with creatures who feed on despair (p. 90-91).

Through such a situation and exchange of dialogues, Karunatilaka has built the setting of the In Between to be negative and reflective. This is evident from the words of Doc Ranees saying that she has been In Between for two hundred and fifty moons, and remembering her failures, poverty and struggles in life. "I have known pain" and "the In Between is purgatory filled with the Lost" (Karunatilaka, 2022, p. 92) substantiate this very perspective on the purgatory existence of the ghost characters.

As the struggles in the purgatory in the novel are considered as a journey towards the afterlife, the entrapment through the seven moon stages stays in between the past, i.e. life till death and the post-purgatory existence. This in-betweenness of the characters can be equated to a condition of experiencing uncertainty in their existence as ghosts, the anxiety of becoming entrapped in such unusual settings, and ambiguity in what could happen to them in future (Mathew, 2022). This makes them to be in a spatial or ideological existence similar to that of "a no-man's-land betwixt and between the structural past and the structural future" (Turner & Bruner, 1986, p. 41). The concept of structural past and future points to the

theoretical framework of liminality discussed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner in their several works. The state of transition or threshold between two different phases, often characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty, allows the transformation of social structures in an individual thus allowing for the emergence of new forms of organisation and meaning (Levi-Strauss, 1949). The In Between purgatory stage made as a major setting of the novel provides this anti-structural existence of the characters and perceives liminality as a temporal interface whose attributes partially flip those of the previously established order (Turner, 1974, p. 73). Here, the characters including the narrator have been transited from their life in the world because of the death or murder. This can be considered as their pre-liminal stage. The in-between existence, as its name suggests is the liminal phase of this transition from the pre to the post-liminal phase. The Light or the afterlife is the post-liminal phase of the characters' transitory liminality as they achieve relief and escape from the entrapment in the moon stages.

The transition through the moon stages in the liminal phase has several parallel explanations. A prominent belief and tradition related to it is the purgatory existence taught by the Catholic Church as per their theology. The belief in purgatory is primarily held by the Catholic Church and is based on several biblical passages, including 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, which speaks of a person's works being tested by fire, and Matthew 5:25-26, which describes settling accounts before going to court (*King James Bible*, 2017). A similar concept in Islam is 'Barzakh' which is often translated as an intermediate state or a temporary state that a person enters after death and before the Day of Judgement. In this state, the person's soul is separated from their body, and they are either in a state of comfort or torment depending on their deeds in life. However, unlike in Purgatory, the purpose of Barzakh is not to purify the soul, but rather to await judgment. Also, according to Islamic traditions and interpretations, there exist varying opinions on such details. However, the more detailed version of the such purgatory experience is mentioned in the Buddhist traditions, and recorded in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1947). It divides the liminal existence into three bardos, namely the Chikhai Bardo, the Chonyid Bardo, and the Sidpa Bardo which has further sub-divisions. the bardo stages are seen as transitional states between one life and the next, and the focus is on guiding the consciousness of the deceased person through these stages in order to achieve a positive rebirth. The ultimate goal is to help the deceased person achieve enlightenment and escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth altogether.

The intentional setting of the *In Between* by the author for the narrative of the novel provides scope for interpretative analysis of the same with that of the civil war condition in Sri Lanka during the time. Compared to that of the pre-liminal and post-liminal phases, the liminal phase through the seven moon stages expresses the anxious state of the characters who are entrapped in the ambiguous situation. The alienation from their pre-liminal phase has made it an unusual and unanticipated event (Goodman et al., 2016) for them. The narrator was not aware of his death and existence in the purgatory liminal phase until he discovered the truth.

The words come easily to you even though you have not had time to consider them. Do you want to see your body? Do you want your life back? Or the real question which you really should be pondering. How the hell did you get here?

(Karunatilaka, 2022, p. 11)

The unanticipated event of transition from a worldly life to the purgatory stage by death makes the existence complex and unresolved until the ghostly nature of the character finds the Light by passing through the seven moons. The concealment of one's own death leads to the transition that happens in the plot of the novel and can be related to the situation of the victims of the civil war who were, in the initial stages, not even able to realise that they are being part of a problematic situation in their country having the potential to last for more than two decades. The gradual development in the novel through the second person perspective by discovering the truth of existence mirrors the unscrupulous impact of the civil war on the victims. It points to the fact that "Sri Lanka itself is purgatory for many, hanging between life and death or near death or after death" (John, 2022).

The situation of civil war in Sri Lanka has created chaos in the most affected regions, especially the northeastern region of the country. The transition from the pre-liminal existence of the people in the regions witnessed the burning of the Jaffna library in May 1981, a deadly ambush on the Sri Lankan army in 1983, and several massacres and pogroms in Colombo. The government responded with a brutal crackdown, and violence soon erupted across the country, with Tamils being attacked and killed by Sinhalese mobs. The government's heavy-handed response and the scale of the violence that erupted across the country that year marked a turning point, pushing the country into a long and bloody conflict that lasted for more than two decades. The insecurities and unusualness unlike in the

past began with these conflicts in several parts of the country coercing the people to experience a state of liminality within and around. Liminal beings are not within the laws that govern any particular stage or category (Turner, 1969, p. 95) and find themselves in liminal positions due to increased ethnic violence and cleansing (Appadurai, 2006). As recently seen in the Ukraine-Russia war, Tigray conflict, Israel-Gaza conflict, etc., though the people in the forefront get involved in leading the conflicts, it would be the common people who get forced into the destructions, loss of beloved ones, displacement, financial insecurities, and the trauma caused by witnessing and experiencing the violence.

Similar to how the ghostly characters wander around in their purgatory liminal phase, the lives of people victimised as part of the civil war can also be identified as liminal where they can collectively be called human beings with diverse experiences and perspectives but going through the same liminal situation. Although not a community, they would come close to the concept of *communitas* proposed by Victor Turner. He says about such luminaries as a sense of egalitarian comradeship and community that exists within the boundaries of liminal spaces or among liminal beings (Turner, 1969, p. 96). With many features of a liminal entity, the protesters of the civil war could also be recognised as having slipperiness of identities inherent in *communitas* that in turn become threatening to an established political or social entity (Riggan, 2011, p. 136). This collective identity is entitled to them because of the altered situations as part of the civil war.

The scope of liminal space could be both spatial and ideological. Liminal spaces refer to spaces that are on the boundary or threshold of two different places or states of being. These spaces can be physical, such as a no-man's-land between two warring factions, or ideological, such as being caught between conflicting values or loyalties. One spatial liminal space that individuals may find themselves in during a civil war is a refugee within their own country. Refugees may also be forcefully subjected to displacement, which can further compound the liminal nature of their situation. These may be physically dangerous and subject to attack, and individuals caught in these spaces may be at risk of being killed or captured by one side or the other. In contrast to the physical existence in such liminal spaces, ideological liminal spaces can be equally challenging for individuals during the period of the civil war. For example, in the case of the victims of the civil war in Sri Lanka, with the influence of several factors including their collective memory and fashioning, people may find themselves torn between loyalty to different political or ethnic groups. This can

create a sense of dislocation and alienation as they struggle to navigate the competing demands of different factions. The helplessness of the victims, as seen in the narrator who struggled to find the cause of his death and the murderers, and the voicelessness of such majority reflect the emotions and feelings of liminal entities transiting from their pre-liminal and existing in the liminal phase for more than expected.

### **Beyond Heteronormativity: In Between Status of Sexuality**

The liminal aspect of the novel by Shehan Karunatilaka does not limit to the liminal spaces, events, or beings, rather it also discusses the liminal attributes of sexual orientation. The narrator is referred to as a homosexual who has a relationship with DD. Likewise, other characters also are introduced to having such diverse sexual orientations from the majority group. This sexual orientation has been a topic of debate and controversy for decades due to cultural and legal differences in the way it is viewed around the world. Despite recent advances in the recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, homosexuality is still illegal in many countries, and even in some places where it is legal, social stigma and discrimination against homosexuals persists. In many Western countries, including the United States and Europe, attitudes towards homosexuality have become more accepting over the past few decades. However, there are still significant cultural and religious barriers to acceptance in many communities, particularly in more conservative areas. In other parts of the world, such as Africa and the Middle East, homosexuality is often viewed as taboo or even immoral, and LGBTQ+ individuals face social stigma, discrimination, and even violence. In some countries, such as Russia, anti-LGBT propaganda laws have been introduced in recent years, leading to increased hostility towards LGBTQ+ individuals and organisations. Research has shown that cultural and legal views on homosexuality can have a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals. Discrimination and stigmatisation can lead to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts. In addition, many LGBTQ+ individuals experience discrimination and violence in the workplace, in schools, and in other areas of their lives, leading to economic and social disadvantages. These issues have been highlighted by human rights organisations and are the subject of ongoing research and advocacy. The root causes could be social stigmatisation, religious views, cultural perspectives, myths, and unchanged legal codes (Ranaweera, 2022, p. 472).

Karunatilaka, in the novel, shares certain perspectives on the situation prevailing in a community where majoritarian ideology is considered

over the other. Though there are exaggerations and overemphasis to it, the reality remains true.

There may come a time when homosexuals can kiss on the street, get mortgages together and die in each other's arms. Not in your lifetime. In your lifetime, you meet a stranger in a dark place and never see them again. Or you have secret affairs that end with no time for heartache.

(Karunatilaka, 2022, p. 24)

In the present world of discussions on the incompleteness of the binary concept of gender, homosexuality continues to have its prominence in stating differences and challenging the orthodox attitude of society. Gender is defined as processes and differences of social construction that align to the binary of feminine and masculine, and blended elements of both, or neither. Therefore, when an individual's gender identity does not align with the extremist binaries, a category of gender minority arises (Rush-ton et al., 2019). The majority group of people come under the category of heterosexuals where male-female attraction and vice versa are termed as widely accepted. On the contrary, the homosexual orientation of an individual could be identified as a gender minority that is often treated unusually, observed anxiously, and that continues to have an ambiguous state of existence among many in society. As they are in the category of experiencing a form of alienation, as expressed in the novel, they would come under the category of liminal beings struggling to own their space of existence within the large group of people in different societies. From such a perspective of viewing their existence as liminal, their identity as liminal beings, and their extent in society as liminal space, the novel clearly highlights their challenges and struggles.

## **Conclusion**

The transitional trajectory of liminality cannot be completed without the exit from the liminal phase experienced by the characters in the novel. As how the civil war and associated political issues in Sri Lanka got over by 2009, Karunatilaka is conscious of the post-liminal phase of the characters in the novel. The characters including the narrator reach the Light, the afterlife after the journey through the seven moons. The significance of the Light and the exit from the liminal phase is also connected with the civil war scenario because an escape from the extreme atrocities caused by the war for the people, especially the innocent victims, led them not only out

of the war but also towards a life that could provide hope and stability. The difference between the unstructured and structured identity reflects in the lives of the victims of the Sri Lankan civil war. Although the conflict is said to have been suppressed by the Sri Lankan army, the aftereffects of it still reverberate in the society. The recent flawed politics and the resultant financial crisis in the country can have indirect relations with the aftereffects of the civil war. As a result of a combination of flawed macroeconomic and foreign policies, as well as autocratic political decision-making during the civil war and subsequent political instability, the small island nation has been plunged into an unparalleled socio-economic crisis (Sahoo et al., 2022). This makes the work of Sheshan Karunatilaka relevant and significant even after more than one decade of the conflict. From the point of view of discussing civil war and homosexuality in the novel, the dialogue, "'I've been In Between all my life,' said the she who was a he. 'Maybe this is where I belong'" (Karunatilaka, 2022, p. 285) provides multidimensional meanings and interpretations. It was said by a middle-aged man dressed in a Kandyan sari with bangles and chains and dollops of make-up (p. 284-285). This points to the liminal existence during the civil war and associated experiences in life, and also the liminality experienced due to the sexual identity and orientation of the character.

Likewise, conflicts by and resistance to majoritarian ideological forces would always create a liminal situation in the victimised sections of society who are marginalised, alienated, and exploited. Thus, it is very significant that the transitional quality of the individual and associated settings help to escape and overcome the liminal existence.

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