

# ‘Betwixt’ and ‘Between’: Exploring Liminality in Appupen’s *The Snake and The Lotus*

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the concept of liminality and its manifestation in the graphic novel *The Snake and the Lotus* by Appupen. Liminality refers to the transitional state between two defined stages or identities. It represents a threshold, a liminal space where individuals or societies undergo transformation, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Appupen explores this theme through his captivating narrative and visually striking artwork. The book depicts a dystopian realm known as Halahala, which is distinguished by the presence of repressive systems such as the dominance of nature in the external environment and the sentient White City, as well as the authoritarian presence of robotics. Furthermore, the power relations within this world are perverted, evident via the existence of godlings and grey workers. The protagonist, a multidimensional character, embarks on a journey of self-discovery and liberation. As she navigates the surreal landscapes, she encounters enigmatic characters and finds herself in a mechanized society where most of the beings are either semi-god (godling inspector), monsters (grey monster of Green), zombified laborers, or the machines (sentient White City). Three transitional phases have accompanied her transition from outsider to oppressed. The transition from pre-liminal to post-liminal molds her identity and reveals social taboos and power relations. Appupen's narrative employs symbolism and metaphors to delve into the issues of social, political, and cultural significance in India. Through the exploration of liminality, Appupen invites readers to reflect on their own experiences of transition and transformation. The graphic novel raises questions about identity, conformity, and the potential for personal and societal change and challenges the notion of established structures.

**Keywords:** liminality, speculative fiction, dystopia, halahala, authoritative capitalism

## **Introduction**

A segment of modern popular fiction demonstrates a preoccupation with liminal spaces. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep defined the liminal or ‘threshold’ phase as the state of being ‘betwixt and between,’ which can catalyse the emergence of a new identity or social status.<sup>1</sup> In her work on Scottish fiction, Julia Maria Hammer argues that liminality serves as a means to elucidate the latent progressions of pertinent societal issues pertaining to matters of socioeconomic status, sex, and identity.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary graphic novels that deal with liminal characters include Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, which explores the liminal space between childhood and adulthood;<sup>3</sup> Marjane Satrapi’s

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 10-37.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Maria Hammer, *Crossing Limits: Liminality and Transgression in Contemporary Scottish Fiction* (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Kylee Carcione, *Embodiment and Identity Construction: Liminal Spaces in Queer Literature* (Masters

*Persepolis*, which portrays the liminal experience of growing up between two cultures,<sup>4</sup> and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, which follows the protagonist's dream, one of the endless, as he navigates through the realm of dreams, the afterlife, and other supernatural domains.<sup>5</sup> In the realm of literature, narratives and characters that exist in a liminal state are often symbolic representations of the process of transformation, initialization, personal growth, and social critique. Elena Dell'agnese posits that the speculative fiction genre embodies the highly structural concept of the liminal. 'Speculative Fiction' is an umbrella term that explores imagined worlds, societies, or technologies, often focusing on the potential consequences of scientific and technological progress;<sup>6</sup> such genres "while representing an imaginary future, can transmit the concerns of the present."<sup>7</sup>

George Mathan, the "man of dark tales and dystopian universes,"<sup>8</sup> is a critical and complex artist in the Indian graphic narrative space. Appupen built his opus on the mythical realm of Halahala,<sup>9</sup> which is significantly dystopian in nature and full of liminal conditions. The author's utilisation of scientifically and cognitively explained alternative worlds are fictitious, resembling present-day reality. This particular notion, referred to as 'cognitive estrangement' by the science fiction critic Darko Suvin, is "a fundamental characteristic of high-quality science fiction and speculative fiction."<sup>10</sup> Appupen employs this device to critique Indian society for exhibiting authoritarianism, materialistic values, mechanistic tendencies, and a heightened inclination to religious beliefs. This approach of examining familiar elements from an alternative perspective has the potential to generate different views, and transcends mere diversionary entertainment. This perspective is substantiated by Kabita Mondal who argues that via "Appupen's rhetoric of satire, the reader may be able to reconfigure the system of the whole world."<sup>11</sup>

The concept of liminality and the 'third space' or 'other space' has been widely discussed by scholars such as Victor Turner, Homi K. Bhabha, and Michel Foucault. Taking cues from their research, this article analyses *The Snake and The Lotus*<sup>12</sup> (henceforth *TSTL*) through the lens of liminality and speculative fiction to explore a different dimension of Appupen's storytelling. Therefore, *TSTL* brings a sense of wonder and a "what if" setting, as it focuses on the "events that are impossible under the physical

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Thesis, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2022), pp. 17-24.

<sup>4</sup> Sandor Klapcsik, "Acculturation Strategies and Exile in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2016), pp. 69-83.

<sup>5</sup> Erica McCrystal, "Liminality and the Gothic Sublime of the Sandman," in *The Artistry of Neil Gaiman*, eds. Joseph Michael Sommers and Kyle Eveleth (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), pp. 185-203.

<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Heinlein, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction," in *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, ed. Rob Latham (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp. 17-21.

<sup>7</sup> Elena Dell'agnese, "Post-Apocalypse Now: Landscape and Environmental Values in *The Road* and *The Walking Dead*," *Geographia Polonica*, vol. 87, no. 3 (2014), pp. 327-341.

<sup>8</sup> "Appupen Tales," *Mathrubhumi*, 9 February (2023). At: <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/special-pages/mbifl-2023/appupen-ales-1.8295009>.

<sup>9</sup> Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," *College English*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1972), pp. 372-382.

<sup>11</sup> Kabita Mondal and Joydeep Banerjee, "Silence, Satire and Empathy: Reading Appupen's Topoi in His Wordless Graphic Narratives," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2021).

<sup>12</sup> Appupen, *The Snake and the Lotus: A Halahala Adventure* (Chennai: Westland, 2018).

laws and constraints of our ordinary world."<sup>13</sup> I explore the diverse array of world-building techniques employed by the author within the context of the novel.

### Liminality: A Definition of Space 'in-between'

The roots of the phrase liminality may be traced back to its Latin stem 'limen,' which translates to 'threshold.' Arnold van Gennep introduced the concept in the discipline of anthropology in *Les Rites de Passage* ('The Rites of Passage' [1909]). Later, the concept of liminality was popularised by Victor Turner in the 1960s. According to Turner, liminality is "the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the status they will hold when the rite is complete."<sup>14</sup>

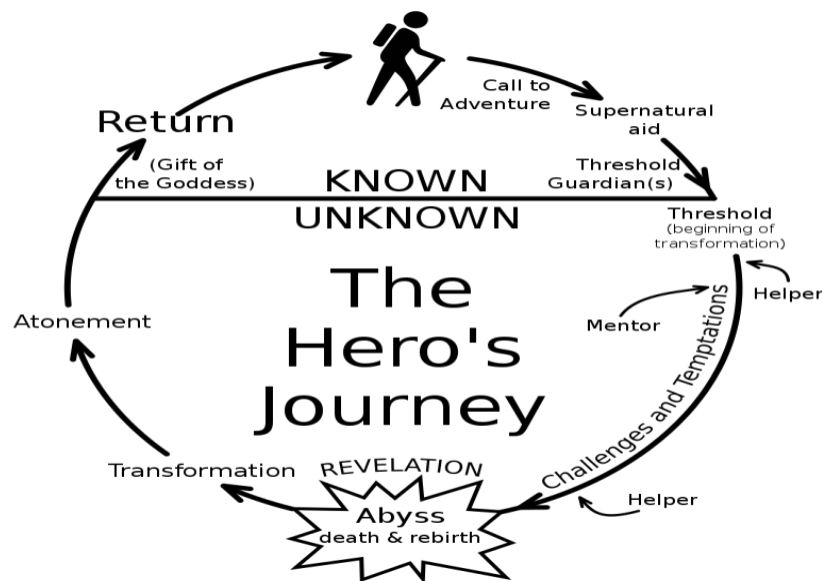


Figure 1. Hero's/Heroine's journey in liminal space.

This study uses the concept of "rites of passage" as an organizing principle to delineate significant moments of social transformation and to analyse the fictional characters. It outlines a process by which individuals or groups progress through three distinct stages to attain varying levels of social status. These three stages, identified by van Gennep, are pre-liminal, liminal or in-between, and post-liminal.<sup>15</sup> During the 'pre-liminal' stage, an individual experiences a state of separation from their current life. In Turner's liminal phase, the individual undergoes a change both symbolically and literally relegated to the periphery,<sup>16</sup> which makes them vulnerable and marginal. In the ultimate phase of the post-liminal, the individual is reintegrated into the community/society. Often, the concept of a

<sup>13</sup> Russell B. Gill, "The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2013), pp. 71–85.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Turner, "Liminal to liminoid in play, flow and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology," *Rice University Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3 (1974), pp. 53-92

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Bjørn Thomassen, "The Uses and Meaning of Liminality," *International Political Anthropology*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2009), pp. 5–28.

<sup>16</sup> Andrews Hazel, and Les Roberts, "Liminality," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, second edition (2019), pp. 131–337.

‘liminal being’ is applied to define a character who is in an ambiguous/uncertain state. However, this explanation exhibits structural illogicality when examined from certain perspectives. For example, Peter L. Salvesen notes that, “an individual who is both human and inhuman at the same time is not really in either of these states.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, the ‘human’ is understood solely in relation to its antithesis, the ‘inhuman.’ The coexistence of opposing attributes within a character result in their mutual negation. This explains Turner’s idea that the “coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is *neither* this *nor* that, and yet is *both*.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, it shows the novel’s liminality, wherein an individual transitions from one state of being to another, undergoing a transformative experience and finding herself/himself “physically and [emotionally] in a magico-religiously ... special situation for a certain length of time.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Betwixt & Between: *The Snake and The Lotus***

In literature, liminal characters and settings often symbolize transformation, initiation, and personal growth as they navigate the boundaries between the familiar and the unknown. Appupen’s characters are not only the embodiment of ‘in-between’ qualities, but also his graphic novels deal significantly with the threshold or in-between space. The graphic novel, *TSTL*, owes much to Lynd Ward, the mastermind behind the woodcut novels of the early twentieth century, as Appupen adopted this art style.<sup>20</sup> *TSTL* is heavily invested with black and white rough, contrasted, and textured illustrations of the story’s liminal and fantastical elements. His imaginative world interacts with reality to critique various socio-political inequities, and to propose solutions. He asks readers to “peep inside ... minds” to question the reality around them. Hence, as Appupen puts it, “if you go deep into your mind, I say there will be a window or a portal into Halahala, which is your inner mind.”<sup>21</sup> The story revolves around distinct facets of the fictional domain of halahala. It portrays two primary liminal characters: the girl protagonist (diachronic) summoned by nature to save humanity, and the godling inspector (synchronic). Alongside this, the story concentrates on ‘Godlings’ or the automated human beings who survive by consuming ‘pills.’ The poor zombified beings (grey folks) are ruled by the Godlings living within the ‘White City,’ and the ‘Silent Nature’ called ‘Green’.

### **Pre-Liminal/Separation**

The novel opens with the embodiment of a liminal atmosphere as the girl is summoned by the Green. In this pre-liminal stage, the focus is on the journey of the girl from the

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<sup>17</sup> Petter Lundegaard Salvesen, *Liminal Characters in the Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick* (Masters Thesis, University of Agder, 2011), pp. 17-65.

<sup>18</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Neil H. Donahue, *A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism* (Rochester: Camden House, 2010), pp. 111-137.

<sup>21</sup> Shrabanee Khatai and Seema Kumari Ladsaria, “On Demystifying the Consumerist Bubble and Dismantling the Obsession with Superheroes: An Interview with Comic Artist Appupen,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 15 (2023), pp. 1–11.

desolate, barren landscape to her visit to the White City. Appupen introduces the human girl in the centre of the page, chewing her food (a small rat like creature) to fill her stomach. In this close-up full panel image, Appupen focuses on her face and body features, which reveal the broken 'din' on her head, broken fingers, bandages, and the skin tone 'grey.' The page is full of white and black colour; the 'grey' here signifies the blending of both two (black and white mixed in a proportioned manner produces grey). Appupen's usage of white and black is in line with Scott McCloud's analysis; he states, "while pictures in colour accentuate form, with black and white images the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form."<sup>22</sup> While surviving and running through ruined corridors (signifies a state of in-betweenness), the girl encounters "the giant of the Grey" and is awestruck by its size and magnitude. The girl and the big grotesque creature are positioned in the middle of the passage, which evoke a liminal sense of "*neither here nor there yet in-between*," as the future of both nature and humanity is in question.<sup>23</sup> Employing the lower-to-upper angle technique to see the world is notable in this frame. The girl is situated in a subordinate position with respect to the environment, gazing up towards the monstrous creature and the ominous circumstances. The dimensions of the character serve to corroborate the assertion that humans experience a sense of powerlessness, fear, and hopelessness when confronted with the overwhelming forces of nature. It is supported by the author in the earlier page where he says, "humans think they are still the masters" (unpaginated) which is not true yet contrary. The scene brings forward the notion of sublime environment. According to James, this is a "feeling of helplessness and terror when humans realise their frailty and small size in the face of the might and magnitude of the universe."<sup>24</sup>

The girl is not harmed by the creature because she is summoned by nature to save it, and to save the world from destruction. Therefore, "the giant of the Grey understands her" and lets her venture further. In the end, she gets caught by the automaton robots who search through ruins to capture human beings and bring them to the White City to turn them into robotic slaves. Through the character of the Grey monster, nature initiated the pre-liminal ritual by driving the girl to be caught by the robotic machines. Gunnell states, in the pre-liminal participant gets "detached ... from normal life" by force or willingly.<sup>25</sup> This pre-liminal stage of the first part of the story evokes a sense of 'uncanny' or uneasiness in the readers' psyche. Sigmund Freud posits that the uncanny elicits fear due to its ability to reveal repressed fears and anxieties that have been previously encountered. The concept of the uncanny elicits a sense of unease and apprehension in individuals as it presents a peculiar combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity. This paradoxical experience of being both attracted and repelled by the uncanny contributes to the overall feeling of discomfort.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Turner, *The Rites of Passage*, pp. 20-37

<sup>24</sup> Edward James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 102-108.

<sup>25</sup> Terry Gunnell, "Busar: Initiation Traditions in Icelandic Gymansia," in *The Ritual Year and Ritual Diversity, Proceedings from the International Conference of the SIEF Working Group on the Ritual Year*, eds L. Midholm and A. Nordstöm (Gothenburg: Institutet för språk och folkminnen, 2006), pp. 287-297.

<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund*



Figure 2. The girl and the grotesque creature of the grey.

This sense of uncanny is the primary feature of the gothic mode of storytelling and gothic is a form of liminality. According to Peter Messent, “what the Gothic does, in its use of the literalisation of metaphor and of doubling is to set up a liminal fictional space where subject and society can be brought together and challenge our fixed preconceptions we would otherwise deny.”<sup>27</sup> Hence, Pramod K. Nayar has called this part of the story an “ecological gothic: which do not support (green) life” and it is a world “that themselves are constituted by blurred borders and monstrous affiliations.”<sup>28</sup> The landscape here is devastated, barren, dark black, and dispersed with the remains of all kinds presents “the greatest corpse of all.”<sup>29</sup> In the first half, Appupen questions the future of humanity in a post-apocalyptic dystopian setting where the machines and humans have taken over every space of nature and left no significant values for those creatures of ‘other space.’ This echoes the current threats of ‘Artificial Intelligence’<sup>30</sup> and ‘Virtual Reality,’<sup>31</sup> and the threat of global warming on Earth. What will be humanity’s future if they forget nature’s role in this era of global warming? This pushes speculative fiction’s main

*Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1919), pp. 219-252.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Messent, “American Gothic: Liminality in Thomas Harris’s Hannibal Lecter Novels,” *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2000), pp. 23–35.

<sup>28</sup> Pramod K. Nayar, *Bhopal’s Ecological Gothic: Disaster, Precarity, and the Biopolitical Uncanny* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2017), pp. 11-68.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Chabon, “After the Apocalypse,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 15 (2007), p. 24. At: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/02/15/after-the-apocalypse/>.

<sup>30</sup> G. Kalvikkarasi, “The Science Novum as Metaphor Analysis of Philip Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*,” *International Journal of English Literature and Social*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2019), pp. 732-735.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Baker, Ralph Pawling, and Stephen Fairclough, “Assessment of Threat and Negativity Bias in Virtual Reality,” *Scientific Reports*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2010), pp. 1–10.



concern, the "what if," and forces the reader to "examine current societal foibles."<sup>32</sup>

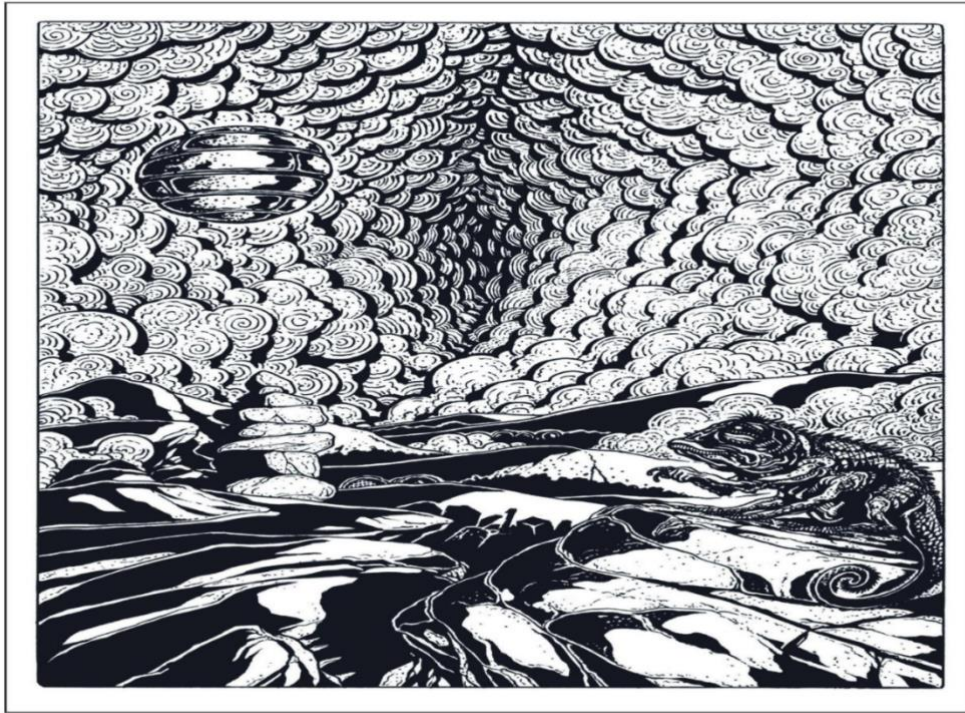


Figure 3. Spaceship and portal (liminal agent).

### **Liminal/ Transitional**

In the second part of the story, the author showcases the girl's initiation ceremony through which she attains a new identity and reveals aspects of liminality hidden inside the city of machines, a clearly oppressive structure. The mechanized city has consciousness, and it turns humans into humanoids or slaves. Here, the sentient White City serves as the high culture, and humans serve as the low culture. Societal norms have been turned upside down in Appupen's world. As Bhabha says, "this process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received' tradition... and challenge normative expectations of development and progress."<sup>33</sup> After getting caught by the robotic machines, the girl is sent to the white city (which can be called the 'city of lotus') inside a round-shaped spaceship, and it passes through a white, cloudy, ambiguous 'portal'.

According to Kara Hanson, "the portal is an agent of change, both negative and positive."<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the portal serves as a catalyst for change, with the potential to yield both favourable and unfavourable outcomes (in-between/liminal). In the next stage the

<sup>32</sup> Dianna C. Lacy, *Expanding the Definition of Liminality: Speculative Fiction as an Exploration of New Boundaries* (Masters Thesis, University of New Orleans, 2019), pp. 1-33.

<sup>33</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Kara Hanson, "At the Threshold: Science Fiction Portals as Agents of Liminality," *Medium*, 9 August (2021). At: <https://kshanson.medium.com/at-the-threshold-science-fiction-portals-as-agents-of-liminality-1f1e65ff1b2a>.

spaceship passes through this cloudy portal, magnifying the scale of the mechanized structure of city and its buildings. After landing on the city, the spaceship opens inside a uterus like steel structure, representing a womb, and the girl is seen semi-naked only with a 'white cloth' on her upper body.

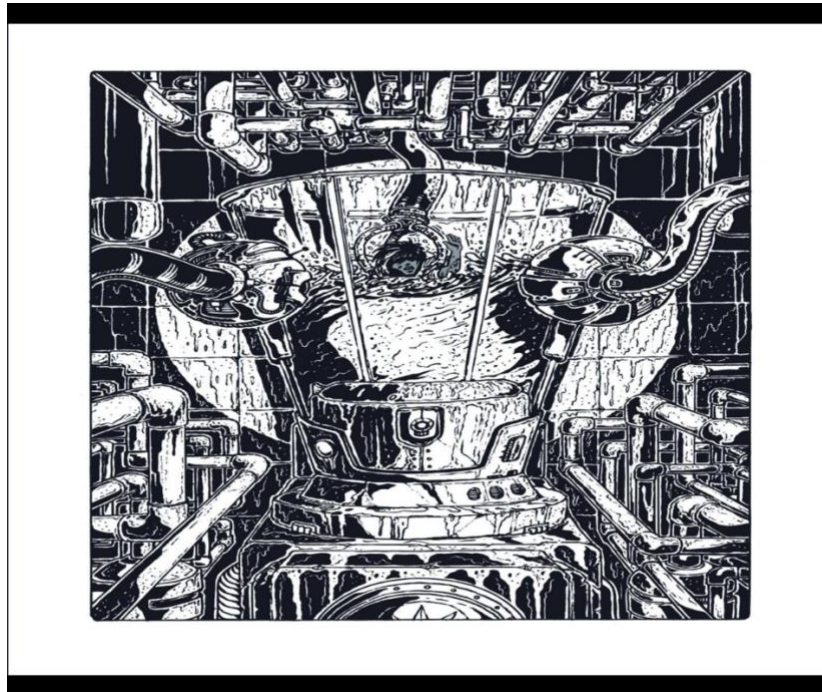


Figure 4. Cleansing of body and mind ritual.

The author writes after two panels where the girl's initiation rituals begin, "the white city turns the remaining humans into machines." The narrative depicts a scene where the girl is submerged in a pool of white milk to be cleaned. She is then subjected to a mechanical hand operated by the city of machines, and the process is monitored by two robotic 'eyes'. This bears a resemblance to Foucault's notion of panopticism and Sartre's concept of the gaze.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, within the confines of an autopsy apparatus, the girl is provided with garments to don and white milk to consume. Later in the event she fails to comprehend her obligations, and the authoritarian machines reprimand her and other 'greyfolks'. The author says, "the humans have been cleansed, body and mind. The white voice took command of them with just a few words." Justifying this point of view, Turner says, 'threshold' people "have no status and are often stripped of property or clothing which would mark their rank in the liminal phase."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Angelina Vaz, "Who's Got the Look? Sartre's Gaze and Foucault's Panopticism," *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 32 (1995), pp. 33–45.

<sup>36</sup> Hazel and Roberts, "Liminality," pp. 131–37.



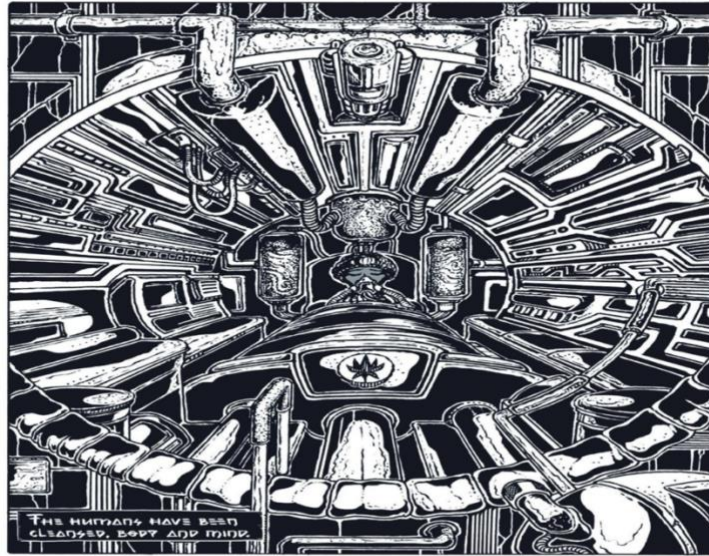


Figure 5. Cleansing ceremony.

Therefore, these scenes are of significance as they effectively convey the central concept of liminality, namely the notion of a 'ceremonial rebirth,'<sup>37</sup> which initiates the girl's new identity as 'Greyfolk.' Appupen's portrayal of the female protagonist involves her journeying through a hallway that symbolizes a liminal space. White lines define this hallway and lack any discernible sideways. The human girl, situated amidst the ongoing conflict between the black and white spaces, symbolizes the liminal individual. The statement "once the voice is clear..." implies that upon indoctrination, individuals become aware of their designated role within the urban landscape and consequently conform to directives.

Therefore, in Appupen's dystopian world, this process causes humans to become thoughtless, zombified labourers of the White City. By showing the "ceremonial rebirth," or the initiation ceremony (liminal phase), the "liminal hallway," and the consumption of "milk" as the only food, Appupen questions the human identity in an industrial setting as well as criticises the social hierarchy and *Capitalist Dictatorship*.<sup>38</sup> As Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry say, "The emergence of zombie figures is often interpreted as a reaction to the dehumanising effects of modern-day global capitalism".<sup>39</sup> Being sentient, the machine has all the characteristics of an authoritarian government. Nikita Sud argues that, "the aggressive, branded and new under an authoritarian and populist strongman seeks the erasure of the old".<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Melford S. Weiss, "Rebirth in the Airborne," *Trans-action*, vol. 4, no. 6 (1967), pp. 23–26.

<sup>38</sup> Milan Zafirovski, *Capitalist Dictatorship: A Study of Its Social Systems, Dimensions, Forms and Indicators* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," *Boundary 2*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2008), pp. 85–108.

<sup>40</sup> Nikita Sud, "The Actual Gujarat Model: Authoritarianism, Capitalism, Hindu Nationalism and Populism in the Time of Modi," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2020), pp. 102–126.



Figure 6. Liminal hallway.

Furthermore, Appupen's narrative depicts the construction of a White City by a machine, with the aim of establishing a community primarily composed of individuals from minority groups. Therefore, the term Greyfolks refers to individuals or groups who do not belong to either the natural world or the White supremacy of 'Godlings' and are thus considered liminal beings. Appupen tries to say that the indigenous communities residing in rural areas are compelled to abandon their customary dwellings and pursue prospects in the dominant industrial society. However, they are unable to sustain themselves and become ensnared in labour politics that offer lower wages, ultimately falling prey to discrimination and the subject of brainwashing to create a herd mentality. Alpha Shah and Jens Lerche share similar perspectives and observe, "Capitalism has long relied on migrant labour that is paid less, works longer, harder, more flexibly, and is more easily controlled."<sup>41</sup> Removing the trace of "Nature Green" in the context of mechanisation also is a kind of cleansing or brainwashing. Thus, through the lens of liminality, capitalist dictatorship makes clear sense in *TSTL* and portrays the raw truth of the "concentration and, in extension, abuse of wealth and power."<sup>42</sup> Varsha Singh's assertion establishes a basis for the interpretation of the above, that the lotus emblem on the front page of *TSTL* works as a symbol of "invincible power and tyrannical authority" within the context of

<sup>41</sup> Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche, "Migration and the Invisible Economies of Care: Production, Social Reproduction and Seasonal Migrant Labour in India," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2020), pp. 719–734.

<sup>42</sup> Milan Z. Zafirovski, "The Social Current Of Capitalist Dictatorship? Neoclassical Economic And Non-Marxist Sociological Conceptualization," *Journal of Ideology*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2022).

religious (Hindu) symbolism.<sup>43</sup> Hence, through the application of liminality within the context of *TSTL*, Appupen represents a society that is both extensively mechanised and dehumanizing.

### Post-Liminal/Reincorporation

This journey into the final stage commenced with the girl's introduction as a 'Temple Queen' in the white city. This episode portrays the leaders summoning of the 'White Flower'. The corrupt Godling is deemed to have received ample blessings by offering the girl to the White City leaders, despite the fact that he only gained a small number of coins.



Figure 7. Rituals to become Temple Queen

During the ceremonial initiation of the Temple Queen, the young woman is submerged in a pool of white milk and purified by the preceding temple queens. Subsequently, she is administered pills to induce a state of intoxication. Appupen says, "The pills take effect as she enters the sacred chamber" and becomes the "enhanced subject." Subsequently, the humanoid/cyborg 'rapes' her. The girl endeavours to impede the cyborg's progress using her five fingers (half-hand); however, the cyborg's colossal stature dominates the panel, annihilating her presence within it.

<sup>43</sup> Varsha Singh, "Speaking/Showing Silence in Appupen's Graphic Novels," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 12, no. 6 (2021), pp. 1369-1384.





Figure 8. Induction of pills to drug the girl.

This grey girl in *TSTL* is the definition of adiachronic liminal character. She does not belong to the two realities in her progress. She is in a liminal state for a short time.



Figure 9. The girl getting raped.

Appupen depicts the White City leaders wearing superhero costumes to distinguish their identity from the rest of the Grey folks. These suits are, according to Lacy, “is an erasure

of identity through the representation of the masses."<sup>44</sup> The author says in an interview that *TSTL* "has a class structure. The Godlings rule the Lotus City. They have put on a 'white cream' to look white. The people below them are called Greyfolk because they look grey."<sup>45</sup> Appupen thus critiques the caste system and racism prevalent in India.

Appupen's portrayal of the girl as the victim of the cyborg's sexual desire suggests that she is rendered inaccessible to humans and questions "(why) she should just be silent" in the growing rape culture in Indian society.<sup>46</sup> The girl's position has been appropriated by the advanced entity known as the Temple and its privileged officials, who have designated her as an object for sexual gratification. Now being "part-human, part-machine, she is the biotic host to some other creature."<sup>47</sup> Hence, her status as diachronic liminal individual is perfectly portrayed. In the end, the 'godling inspector', who himself goes through a ritual to save the world and nature, *guides* the girl to unite with nature.

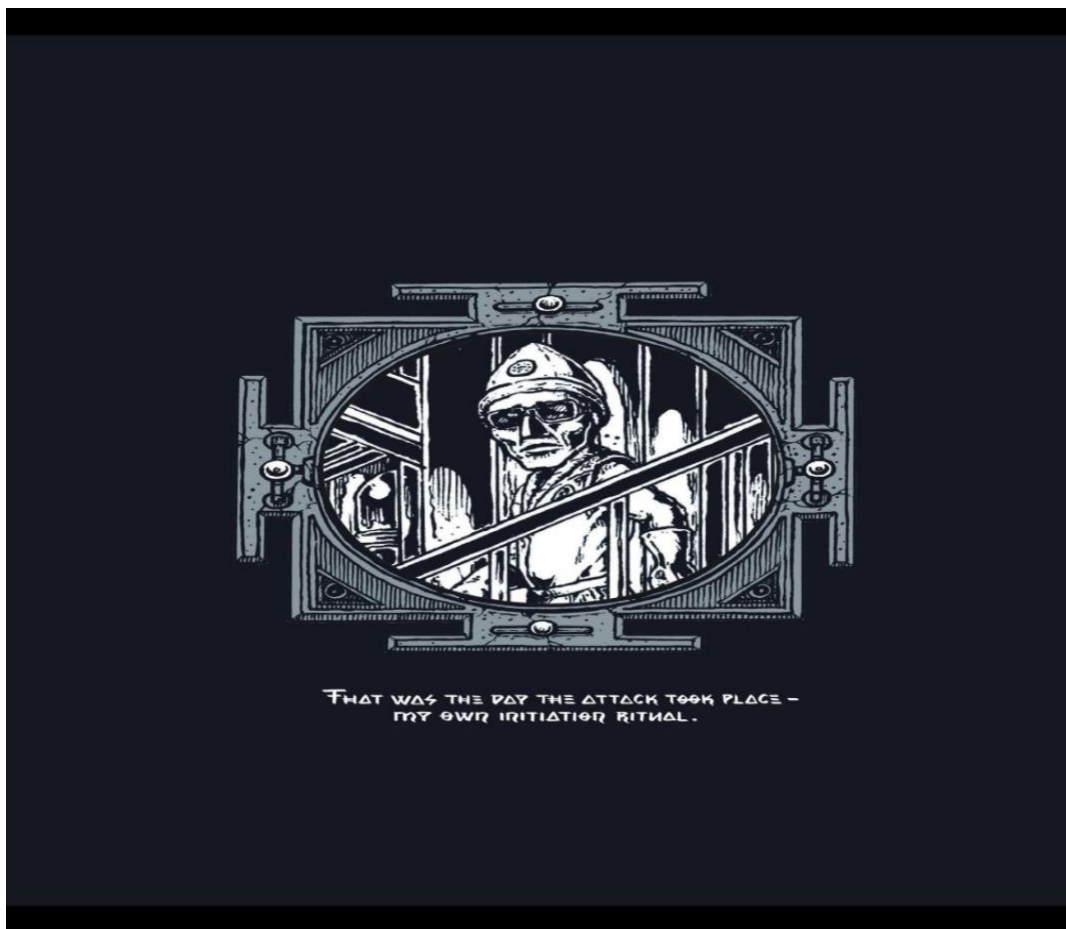


Figure 10. Godling inspector and his initial rituals.

<sup>44</sup> Lacy, *Expanding the Definition of Liminality: Speculative Fiction as an Exploration of New Boundaries*, pp. 1-33.

<sup>45</sup> Khatai and Ladsaria, "On Demystifying the Consumerist Bubble and Dismantling the Obsession with Superheroes," pp. 1-11.

<sup>46</sup> Amanda Taub, "'She Should Just Be Silent': The Real Roots of India's Rape Culture," *Vox*, 6 March (2015). At: <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/5/8156881/india-rape>.

<sup>47</sup> Pramod K. Nayar, "Appupen's Posthuman Gothic: *The Snake and the Lotus*," *South Asian Review*, vol. 39, no. 1-2 (2018), pp. 70-85.



The ‘Godling inspector’ character in the narrative possesses a superhuman quality, embodying a hybrid identity that straddles the realms of human, humanoid forms, divine, demonic, or extra-terrestrial entities. Therefore, he has the synchronic liminal characteristics. According to Lynne Hume, such characters are the “walkers between the worlds” who guide the diachronic characters to their destination.<sup>48</sup> It is possible that the character of ‘godling inspector’ could exist in multiple states and fulfil a dual role as a member of both the natural and supernatural realms as well as a member of the godlings. Therefore, these types of synchronic liminal characters can be regarded as shamans due to their role as mentors and guides for characters experiencing temporal liminality. As stated by Hansen, shamans are “a character type found in mythology, folklore, and literature and appears as animal, human, and god.”<sup>49</sup>

The ending or final ceremonial process starts when the ‘hero’ or the ‘godling inspector’ gets attacked by the giant Grey creature. The blackish page break, where the ‘hero’ gets introduced, says, “That was the day the attack took place-my own initiation ritual.” Moving further, one frame where the ‘hero’ holds the hand of the Grey girl in the middle of the black and white door attracts the attention of the readers.

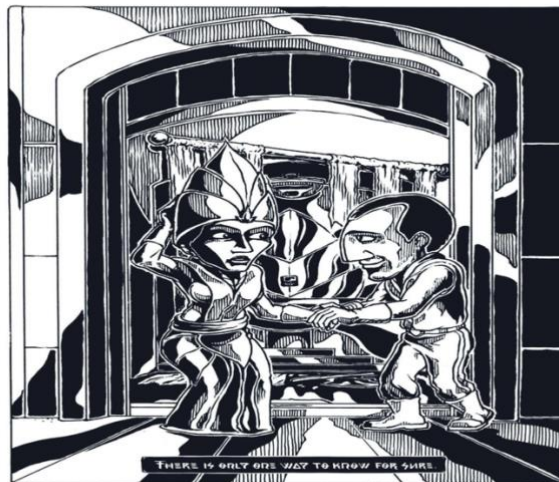


Figure 11. Meeting of the girl and the saviour.

Two characters align themselves in the centre of the panels to show their determination to rebel from the loophole of their mechanical place to live in the nature. The ‘hero’ says, “in an instant her life courses through me. For a moment, there is hope.” Towards the end of the graphic novel, one can see that through the tunnels, the natural swarms and giant grey creatures enter the city and destroy the dominance of the machinery. The godlings take shelters in the belly of the big swarms. Therefore, the reincorporation of the Grey

<sup>48</sup> Kathleen McPhillips and Lynne Hume (eds), *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 10–20.

<sup>49</sup> George P. Hansen, *The Trickster and the Paranormal* (Bloomington: Xlibris US, 2001), p. 28.

girl with nature brings a change after all.



Figure 12. Mingling of the girl with the creature.

The scene of mingling of the nature and the girl is depicted in an astonishing manner. The page is mostly covered by a giant creature and inside his belly a human face appears. The faces of both the girl and the human inside the creature resemble each other because of the striped patterns. The tentacles and the finger of the girl mingle with each other at the end. The interpersonal distance between her and the viewer is close-up, point of view is straight on. Through the above episode, showcasing the interconnectedness of the life form is the ultimate goal for Appupen.<sup>50</sup> That is why the saviour or the inspector says, “it is the end of one journey, but work has just begun.”



Figure 13. Infinite loophole of the beginning and the end.

In the denouement of the narrative, Appupen presents an image of the Halahala realm, wherein serpents consume their own tails, taking on the shape of the numeral eight,

<sup>50</sup> Nayar, “Appupen’s Posthuman Gothic: *The Snake and the Lotus*,” pp. 70–85.

symbolising the perpetual and eternal cycle of the natural order. Hence, Appupen echoes the calling of T.S. Eliot, “what we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning.”<sup>51</sup> This begets a new beginning of a chapter. Thus, the novel ends with the notion of hope. Henceforth, in Appupen’s words, “I wanted to juxtapose the ‘collective mind through artificial intelligence’ versus a ‘collective mind through the spirit of the green’, the interconnectedness of all living things.”<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

Appupen’s world is full of mysteries and speculation. The concept of liminality pertains to the potential for transformation, and Appupen has adeptly employed it by strategically implementing the colour science of white, grey, and black. The liminal characters, situated amidst multiple strange and non-complementary categories, serve to satirize the black and white symbolism that permeates societal structures, thereby also offering a critique of essentialism. As noted by Scott McCloud, in the graphic novel, “meaning is fluid and variable,” as opposed to the fixed and absolute meaning of non-pictorial icons.<sup>53</sup> Appupen’s employment of effective speculative worldbuilding through liminality involves the development of a fictional universe that exhibits a fundamental connection to our own existence. The behavioural patterns and permissible actions of characters within their respective fictional universes offer insights into the acceptable conduct within our own reality. Appupen’s artistic liminal spaces serve as a platform for the expression of both mainstream and marginalized issues. Therefore, his spectacular speculative fiction “requires a far greater willing suspense of disbelief” that takes readers to step into worlds that are other.<sup>54</sup> Henceforth, through these ideas, the Appupen urges us to dive deep inside the minds and critique societal negligence rather than following the herd mentality. This will alter the mainstream narratives, broaden the knowledge base, and connect with our anxieties, fears, and concerns, demonstrating additional ways of existence.

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Little Gidding* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943).

<sup>52</sup> Khatai and Ladsaria, “On Demystifying the Consumerist Bubble and Dismantling the Obsession with Superheroes,” pp. 1–11.

<sup>53</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 15–49.

<sup>54</sup> Lacy, “Expanding the Definition of Liminality: Speculative Fiction as an Exploration of New Boundaries,” pp. 1–33.