

Collapse of the Human: Quantum Semiotics and Migrant Representation in South Asian Narratives

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Abstract: *This study explores how quantum semiotics redefines migrant identities in South Asian narratives, drawing on quantum theory's concepts—superposition, entanglement, and collapse—to analyse the fluidity of displacement. Using Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and Feroz Rather's *The Night of Broken Glass*, the paper examines migration, memory, and survival through a semiotic lens. It identifies three key diagnostics: the collapse of identity under socio-political pressures, the entanglement of personal and collective memory, and the probabilistic agency of migrants navigating fragmented spaces. These insights challenge binaries of belonging and alienation, presenting migrants as trans-local and transhistorical subjects. Through narrative structures, including non-linear temporality and fragmented storytelling, the texts depict migrants as "superpositional" entities inhabiting contradictory states. The study critiques human rights frameworks that fail to accommodate this complexity, arguing for a more dynamic understanding of identity. By integrating quantum-semiotic frameworks, this paper offers a novel approach to migration studies and South Asian literature, demonstrating how displacement serves as both an existential crisis and an epistemological rupture, reimagining the human as dynamic and relational.*

Keywords: *Quantum Semiotics, Migrant Identity, South Asian Narratives, Superposition, Entanglement, Identity Collapse, Displacement, Trans-locality, Memory and Migration, Non-linear Temporality, Human Rights, Epistemological Rupture, Quantum Cognition, Narrative Structures, Transhistorical Subjects.*

INTRODUCTION

The representation of migrant identities in South Asian narratives has traditionally been framed within sociopolitical, economic, and historical discourses. However, this study explores an alternative approach by employing quantum semiotics—an interdisciplinary lens that integrates quantum theory and semiotic analysis—to reconsider the fluidity,

instability, and multiplicity of migrant subjectivities. Quantum mechanics introduces concepts such as superposition, entanglement, and collapse, which can serve as metaphors for understanding how migrants navigate fragmented identities and precarious existences (Barad, 2007). This paper examines how South Asian literary texts, particularly Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and Feroz Rather's *The Night of Broken Glass*, articulate the complexities of migration, memory, and survival within quantum-semiotic frameworks.

These texts provide an alternative perspective on migration, moving beyond the conventional human rights discourse that often fails to accommodate the fluid and multifaceted nature of migrant subjectivities. Instead of representing migration through fixed categories of loss and belonging, these narratives challenge monolithic constructions of identity, demonstrating how migrants exist in superpositional states—simultaneously belonging to multiple spaces and times. The study highlights how displacement challenges traditional understandings of the "human," offering new possibilities for reconceptualizing identity as dynamic and relational rather than static and singular.

By incorporating a quantum-semiotic framework, this research aims to illuminate the complexities of migrant narratives, positioning them as sites of epistemological rupture where identity, memory, and agency are continuously negotiated. The interdisciplinary approach not only contributes to migration studies and South Asian literary criticism but also expands our understanding of how literature can serve as a medium for articulating alternative ontologies of the human experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interdisciplinary approach of quantum semiotics in migration studies is relatively unexplored. However, previous scholarship has examined migration through Postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994), Affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), and narrative identity formation (Ricoeur, 1992). Quantum theory has also influenced humanities research, particularly in quantum cognition and posthumanism (Barad, 2007). By integrating these fields, this study builds on the works of semioticians (Peirce, 1991; Eco, 1984) and literary theorists who investigate how narrative structures shape human experiences (Hansen, 2000). South Asian literature has long engaged with themes of displacement (Ghosh, 2002; Spivak, 1988), but this paper introduces a new lens by mapping quantum mechanics onto literary analysis, providing fresh insights into the ontological instability of migrant identities.

Narrative Structures and Quantum Temporality

The use of fragmented storytelling and non-linear temporality in migration narratives aligns with quantum interpretations of time. Scholars such as Mark Currie (2010) discuss narrative time in relation to uncertainty, arguing that literature can represent multiple temporal states simultaneously. Similarly, Meghan Marie Hammond (2018) explores how contemporary postcolonial literature uses quantum metaphors to describe the oscillation of identity, particularly in diasporic communities. The South Asian texts under study employ such structures to challenge the linearity of migration discourse and present a translocal, transhistorical understanding of displaced subjects.

Critique of Human Rights Frameworks

Traditional human rights discourses often rely on fixed legal definitions of personhood and citizenship (Benhabib, 2004; Agamben, 1998). However, the quantum-semiotic perspective challenges these frameworks by illustrating that migrant identities are probabilistic rather than deterministic. Jacques Rancière (2004) critiques the limitations of universal rights in accommodating fluid subjectivities, a critique that aligns with the argument that existing legal paradigms fail to account for the complex realities of displacement.

By integrating quantum-semiotic frameworks, this study contributes to both migration studies and South Asian literary criticism. While previous research has examined hybridity, trauma, and transnationalism, the application of quantum mechanics to semiotics and narrative structure offers a novel theoretical approach. This perspective reimagines displacement as both an existential crisis and an epistemological rupture, positioning the migrant as a dynamic, relational subject rather than a fixed entity. Further exploration in this field can deepen our understanding of literature's role in articulating the complexities of migration in a rapidly shifting world.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology rooted in literary analysis and quantum semiotics (Derrida, 1976). The primary texts—*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and *The Night of Broken Glass*—are analyzed through close reading, focusing on narrative structures, temporal disjunctions, and semiotic shifts. Key quantum concepts such as superposition, entanglement, and wave-function collapse are used as analytical tools to examine how these narratives depict migration (Zohar, 1990). Additionally, the study draws on comparative textual analysis to identify recurring motifs of precarious identity, memory entanglement, and probabilistic agency across different works (Barad, 2007). By employing an interdisciplinary framework, this methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of how South Asian narratives challenge traditional constructs of human identity and displacement.

Semiotic Collapse of Identity under Displacement

Displacement disrupts the semiotic stability of identity, leading to what can be termed as the "semiotic collapse"—a condition where established signs and meanings fail to hold coherence under the pressures of migration, exile, and socio-political exclusion. In the context of South Asian migrant narratives, identity is not merely uprooted but undergoes a fundamental deconstruction, where fixed markers of selfhood—language, nationality, and cultural memory—become fragmented and destabilized (Bhabha, 1994). Migrants often exist in a liminal state, where their identities oscillate between past affiliations and present realities, leading to an existential condition akin to quantum superposition.

Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* illustrates this collapse through the spectral existence of its protagonist, who exists between life and death, past and present. This liminality mirrors the migrant's struggle, where identity is constantly shifting and being redefined by external forces. Maali, a war photographer navigating the afterlife, represents the disjointed reality of those displaced by violence—his memories, fragmented and nonlinear, refuse to cohere into a singular narrative, embodying the entanglement of past and present. His interactions with ghosts from Sri Lanka's turbulent past reinforce the collapse of identity, as he oscillates between multiple versions of himself—photographer, lover, ghost, and witness to history.

Similarly, Rather's *The Night of Broken Glass* captures the alienation of displaced individuals, whose histories and personal identities are overwritten by dominant political narratives. The novel's characters, such as the exiled poet and the insurgent youth, exist in an in-between space where their pasts are irretrievable, and their futures remain uncertain. The semiotic disintegration of their identities is depicted through fragmented narrative structures, disjointed memories, and non-linear storytelling, reinforcing the instability of selfhood under displacement. The story "The Pheran" particularly highlights this collapse, as the protagonist struggles to reconcile his Kashmiri heritage with the imposed political realities that erase his sense of belonging.

Furthermore, the semiotic collapse of identity is exacerbated by socio-political exclusion. Migrants are often classified within rigid legal and bureaucratic categories that fail to accommodate their fluid realities, reducing them to statistical figures, asylum-seekers, or undocumented individuals. This reduction erases the complexities of their lived experiences, rendering them as liminal subjects who exist between legality and illegality, inclusion and exclusion. The collapse of meaning in their identity constructs challenges the foundational premises of human rights discourse, which assumes a stable and universal category of the "human" (Agamben, 1998). The migrant, in this framework, becomes a paradox—simultaneously visible in discourse yet invisible in agency.

By employing a quantum-semiotic perspective, this study argues that the collapse of migrant identity should not be viewed merely as a crisis but as a site of

epistemological transformation. The instability of meaning creates possibilities for new identity formations that defy rigid classifications and instead embrace fluidity, multiplicity, and relationality. Literature, in this sense, becomes a crucial medium for capturing and articulating the dynamic, fractured, and ever-evolving nature of migrant subjectivities. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Maali's journey through the afterlife serves as a metaphor for the migrant's navigation through multiple identities, forced to reconcile fragmented pasts with present uncertainties. Likewise, Rather's portrayal of Kashmiri displacement underscores how socio-political violence renders identity into a quantum-like state—both present and absent, remembered and forgotten, constructed and erased.

Entanglement of Personal and Collective Memory

Memory serves as a crucial mechanism for migrants to negotiate their displacement, forming an intricate web where personal and collective histories are deeply entangled. The concept of entanglement from quantum theory offers a compelling metaphor for understanding how migrants carry fragmented pasts that are inextricably linked to broader historical and political structures. Migrants exist in a state where their individual recollections are shaped by and, in turn, shape the collective memory of their communities (Assmann, 2011).

Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* exemplifies this entanglement through the protagonist's spectral existence, where he navigates past and present simultaneously. His memories are not merely personal but are embedded in Sri Lanka's violent history, reflecting the interconnectedness of individual trauma and national conflict. Similarly, Rather's *The Night of Broken Glass* portrays memory as an unstable yet persistent force that binds the experiences of displaced individuals to their cultural and geopolitical histories. The characters' recollections serve as sites of resistance against dominant narratives that seek to erase or overwrite their identities.

Moreover, the entanglement of memory disrupts linear temporality, reinforcing the fragmented experience of migration. Migrants exist in multiple temporalities at once—the past continues to exert influence over the present, and the future remains uncertain. This non-linearity is evident in the narrative structures of the

selected texts, where disjointed storytelling techniques mirror the fractured nature of migrant memory. The interplay of personal recollections with collective trauma challenges the notion of a singular, fixed identity, instead presenting the migrant as an entity shaped by multiple histories and relational networks. By conceptualizing migrant memory through the framework of quantum entanglement, this study highlights how literature captures the intricate interconnections between individual and communal histories. The entanglement of memory not only sustains a sense of belonging but also reconfigures the migrant's position within historical and cultural discourse, challenging monolithic representations of identity and displacement.

Probabilistic Agency in Precarious Spaces

Migrants navigate geopolitical spaces where their agency is contingent upon unpredictable sociopolitical forces (Agamben, 1998). This precarious agency can be examined through the quantum concept of probability, wherein an entity exists in multiple states until an external force determines its outcome (Schrödinger, 1935). Migration narratives often depict characters oscillating between belonging and alienation, legality and illegality, survival and erasure (Butler, 2004). Karunatilaka's work demonstrates this through its protagonist's attempts to reconstruct his identity posthumously, engaging in multiple potential realities before settling into one (Karunatilaka, 2022). Such representations challenge the rigidity of human rights discourses, which often fail to accommodate the probabilistic nature of migrant existence (Spivak, 2008). Migration, therefore, becomes a field of fluctuating possibilities, where agency is determined by both structural constraints and individual adaptability, reinforcing the notion that displacement is not just a legal or political condition but also an ontological state of existence.

Quantum Subjectivities: Major and Minor Characters in Entangled Narratives

The characters in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and *The Night of Broken Glass* embody the themes of semiotic collapse, quantum entanglement, and superposition in the context of displacement and migration. These figures challenge fixed notions of identity and belonging, positioning themselves as

liminal entities navigating shifting socio-political realities.

Major Characters and Quantum Subjectivities

Maali Almeida, the spectral war photographer in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, exists in multiple realities simultaneously, embodying the fragmented self that struggles to reconcile personal memory with historical trauma. His spectral existence echoes Schrödinger's cat paradox—both alive and dead—illustrating the migrant's paradoxical condition of being neither fully rooted in the past nor fully assimilated into the present. Karunatilaka employs Maali's liminality to highlight how displaced individuals experience identity as an unstable, superpositional state. Scholarly discussions, such as Perera (2023), have explored Maali's spectrality as a metaphor for Sri Lanka's unresolved historical violence and its impact on postcolonial subjectivity. In *The Night of Broken Glass*, Feroz Rather presents fragmented narratives that explore insurgency and exile. The insurgent youth, for instance, embodies both agency and entrapment—while fighting for a cause, his identity is manipulated by larger ideological forces, leaving him simultaneously empowered and powerless. This aligns with Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space," where identities are constantly negotiated and redefined under colonial and postcolonial power structures. The exiled poet, another central figure, struggles to write his homeland into existence, but his words collapse under the weight of political erasure, reinforcing the quantum uncertainty of his place in history. As Ahmed (2021) discusses, the poet's dilemma reflects the existential instability of displaced intellectuals who oscillate between memory and erasure.

Minor Characters and the Entanglement of Personal and Collective Memory

Beyond the protagonists, minor characters in both novels serve to deepen the exploration of quantum entanglement in migration narratives. The victims of state violence in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*—political dissidents, disappeared journalists, and war casualties—exist as spectral reminders of a collective trauma that refuses to be erased. These figures, as highlighted in Senanayake's (2022) work on South Asian ghost narratives, embody a hauntological

presence that binds the living and the dead, past and present, into an inseparable continuum.

In *The Night of Broken Glass*, the mother figure mourning her disappeared son represents the probabilistic agency of migrants navigating fragmented spaces. Her identity is shaped by absence—her son is both there and not there, creating a psychological state of unresolved grief that mirrors quantum superposition. Rather's use of non-linear storytelling and shifting perspectives enhances this entanglement, portraying identity as relational rather than singular. Recent studies, such as those by Bashir (2020), have examined the role of mourning mothers in Kashmiri literature, interpreting their narratives as sites where personal and political histories become inextricably linked.

Quantum Identity as a Narrative Strategy

By integrating primary textual analysis with scholarly discourse on identity and migration, this section underscores how South Asian literature redefines subjectivity as fluid, entangled, and continuously shifting. Both Karunatilaka and Rather employ fragmented storytelling, spectral presences, and temporal disjunctions to present migration not just as physical displacement, but as an existential and epistemological rupture. This aligns with Wynter's (2003) argument that postcolonial identity must be reimagined beyond the constraints of Western humanist frameworks. Thus, the migrant, in these texts, is neither merely a refugee nor an exile, but a quantum subject—an entity that exists across multiple, contradictory states at once.

Reconceptualizing the Human: A Quantum-Semiotic Approach to Identity in South Asian Narratives

By employing a quantum-semiotic approach, this study critiques neo-colonial constructs of identity that rigidly define the human as a stable, sovereign entity (Wynter, 2003). Traditional humanist frameworks, rooted in Enlightenment thought, have historically conceptualized identity as singular, autonomous, and territorially bound (Mignolo, 2011). However, postcolonial scholarship, particularly through the works of Fanon (1952) and Bhabha (1994), has demonstrated that identity under colonial and postcolonial regimes is always already fractured, contingent, and in negotiation. South Asian narratives reinforce this fragmentation, presenting migrants as

trans-local and transhistorical subjects whose identities are dynamic and relational.

The epistemological rupture enacted by these texts allows for a reconceptualization of the human as an entity in constant flux, rather than a fixed category. Fanon's (1952) argument that colonial subjects exist in a perpetual state of ontological crisis finds resonance in these narratives, where displacement functions as both an existential and epistemological condition. Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and Rather's *The Night of Broken Glass* illustrate how migrant and displaced identities resist categorization, existing within a liminal space that is neither fully past nor fully present. Maali Almeida's spectral existence, for instance, symbolizes the precarious state of those caught between histories of violence and uncertain futures. His identity is never singular—he is simultaneously a war photographer, a ghost, a lover, and a political dissident—mirroring the quantum state of superposition, where multiple possibilities coexist until forced into resolution.

Rather's novel employs fragmented narratives, spectral presences, and temporal non-linearity to depict insurgency and exile as lived realities where identity is not anchored in a single temporal or spatial framework. The exiled poet, for instance, constructs his homeland through memory and language, yet his words continually collapse under the weight of historical erasure. This mirrors Agamben's (1998) discussion of the *homo sacer*, the individual reduced to a state of bare life, existing outside the legal-political structures that grant stable identity and rights. Rather than portraying migration as a mere legal or political condition, these texts suggest that it is an ontological state, where individuals must continually negotiate their existence between absence and presence, memory and forgetting.

By incorporating quantum mechanics' principles of superposition and entanglement, these narratives challenge traditional nation-state paradigms that enforce rigid classifications of citizenship and belonging. Migrants, as depicted in these texts, exist in multiple, overlapping realities, much like quantum states that do not collapse into a single identity until forced by socio-political pressures (Barad, 2007). The characters' shifting identities reflect the idea that belonging is not a binary but a fluid, probabilistic phenomenon. In this context, the nation-state functions as an observer in quantum mechanics,

attempting to force a singular reading onto inherently unstable, multi-dimensional subjects.

This perspective aligns with recent postcolonial migration studies, such as Ghosh (2021), who argues that South Asian diasporic literature destabilizes traditional migration narratives by presenting displacement as a condition of being rather than a temporary state. Furthermore, Bose (2022) discusses how quantum entanglement serves as a metaphor for transnational connections, wherein migrants remain emotionally and culturally entangled with their homelands despite physical displacement.

Ultimately, by moving beyond the binary of inclusion and exclusion that often underpins migration discourse, these texts propose a more fluid, adaptive understanding of human identity. Through their non-linear storytelling, spectral narrators, and fractured chronologies, Karunatilaka and Rather position migration not merely as a crisis of belonging but as an opportunity to reimagine the human as an interconnected, ever-evolving existence shaped by displacement, memory, and survival.

CONCLUSION

Through an interdisciplinary engagement with quantum semiotics, this paper contributes to migration studies and South Asian literature by offering new frameworks for understanding displaced identities. By highlighting the collapse, entanglement, and probabilistic agency of migrant subjectivities, this study underscores the epistemological potential of migration as a site of meaning-making and transformation (Barad, 2007). In doing so, it challenges dominant discourses on human rights and belonging, advocating for a more fluid and relational understanding of the human condition in contemporary migration narratives (Spivak, 2008).

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