

From Crisis to Agency: The Liminal Body as a Site of Identity Formation in *Naruto*

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Abstract

Adolescent identity formation has been a central concern in the literary arena for the last two centuries, since the inception of the bildungsroman genre. Its recent exposition in popular media has been completely unexplored from a theoretical lens. Such narratives not only discuss the formation of individual identity but also inherently critique society that serves as the fundamental condition for identity to emerge, thereby providing a psychosocial understanding of individuals, cultures, and societies in close relation with one another. The article analyzes the Japanese anime *Naruto* (2002-2007), including its extended story arc, *Naruto: Shippuden* (2009-2017), by Masashi Kishimoto, with a focus on the eponymous character's identity formation. It examines how *Naruto's* liminal body, while rendering him vulnerable and socially unacceptable, serves as a site for his personal identity formation, challenging conventional societal forms of warriorship, bravery, and humanity. To this end, the study employs Victor Turner's theory of liminality and liminoidality to highlight how discursive and deviant spaces, bodies, and temporalities can be proven as sites of inclusivity, revolution, and individuality for marginalized groups and individuals, Erik Erikson's psychosocial identity developmental theory, and a brief commentary on the existential aspects of the text. In this way, the article addresses the following questions: a) How does liminality function as a site of identity formation in *Naruto*? b) How does liminality problematize the existential search for meaning for protagonists in contemporary anime series like *Naruto*?

Keywords: Liminality, liminoidality, existentialism, phenomenology of pain, psychosocial Individuality.

Introduction

Japanese animation introduced the world to a new form of moving-picture representation in contemporary pop culture: 'anime'. There is a wide fanbase for the genre, thus leaving an undeniable impact on youth culture, identity, and philosophy across countries and cultures.¹ With an exceptional fandom for *Naruto* (2007-2017), *Black Clover* (2017), *Demon Slayer* (2019), and so on, the young-adult developmental narrative is among the most prominent

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¹ Chahira Bouhella, 'Exploring The Impact of Anime on Algerian Youth Culture', *La Revue de La Communication et Du Journalisme*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2025), pp. 6-24; Lian Buwadi, *The Influence of Japanese Anime Characters on the Cultural Identity Formation of Youth in the Greater Middle East* (Undergraduate dissertation, Western University Canada, 2020). At: <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14721/15081>; Sen Lu and Rong Zhang, 'The Influence of Japanese Anime on the Values of Adolescent', *conference proceedings, ICHSSD 2019*, pp. 272-274. At: <https://doi.org/10.2991/ichssd-19.2019.54>.

recurring tropes in the form, where the story traces the identity formation of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to maturity. In other words, the central plot structures of these representations depict the adolescent protagonists' identity formation, making them even more relevant to contemporary youth.² Anime like *Naruto* not only shows the *bildung* of the eponymous character but also critiques the fixities of social norms, codes, and structure of their fictional societies, making them rigid and non-inclusive for the Other. Inferentially, there is an underlying tussle between the individual and society in *Naruto*, in which the protagonist negotiates with social values and seeks an existential purpose in his liminal, socially demonized body. Along the same line of argument, since the respective fictional universes of the above-mentioned anime do not accommodate liminal personae, the protagonists realize the need for reform in their societies themselves, and personal identity emerges with political maturity and acceptance in these narratives.

The article analyzes the Japanese anime *Naruto* (2002-2007), including its extended story arc, *Naruto: Shippuden* (2009-2017), by Masashi Kishimoto, with a focus on the eponymous character's identity formation. Though it is action-packed and entertaining, *Naruto* also investigates the human condition, deftly portraying pain, identity, and the search for purpose. This study examines how *Naruto*'s liminal body, while rendering him vulnerable and socially unacceptable, serves as a site for his personal identity formation, challenging conventional societal forms of warriorship, bravery, and human existence in the fictional Leaf Village. It traces the development of *Naruto*'s identity through his alienated and lonely childhood, his mischievous acts as deviant ways of visibility, his adolescent existential search for meaning, and his eventual psychosocial identity formation, culminating in his recognition and acceptance in his village. In *Naruto*'s journey, his liminoidality proves significant, providing him with the freedom and space to turn his Otherness into a form of strength and self-control as he emerges victorious in an elaborate fight with the Akatsuki organization (a terrorist dissident group). To this end, the study employs Victor Turner's theory of liminality and liminoidality to highlight how discursive and deviant spaces, bodies, and temporalities can be proven as sites of inclusivity, revolution, and individuality for marginalized groups and individuals, Erik Erikson's psychosocial identity developmental theory, and a brief commentary on the existential aspects of the text. In this way, the article addresses the following questions: a) How does liminality function as a site of identity formation in *Naruto*? b) How does liminality problematize the existential search for meaning for protagonists in contemporary anime series like *Naruto*?

Identity formation has been a recurring theme in literary studies since the eighteenth century, particularly in the bildungsroman genre. It traces the protagonist's development and identity construction in a text. While studies have examined the trope of identity formation in contemporary, modern, and postmodern literary texts,³ contemporary forms of pop culture,

² Roman G. Gomez, Billy Tringali, Caleb Baker and Kristjan Stone, 'The Power of Anime: Using Anime for Education and Outreach in STEM', *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 10 (2025); Hepek Milli, Shalini Agarwal and Shivani Singh 'Exploring Mental Well-Being: A Study of Youth Watching Anime Across Gender', *Journal of Ecophysiology and Occupational Health*, vol. 25 (2025), pp. 509–314; Natalie Ortez-Arevalo, *The Power of Anime: Artistic Power, Social Consciousness, and Cultural Impact* (Master's thesis: University of San Francisco, 2022).

³ Shreyansh Jain and Smita Jha, 'Dystopian Bildungsroman: Rasa, Emotions, and Identity in Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Clone* (2018)', *Humanities*, vol. 12, no. 6 (2023). At: <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12060145>; Shreyansh

media, and television remain untouched in this area. Since the study focuses on anime as its primary subject, it represents a novel intervention in the literary field and makes a significant contribution to existing research in the area. Further, it should also be mentioned that there have been brief enquiries of liminality and identity formation as a synergistic framework (however, the current research also partly presents a brief but fresh take in theory where liminality and existentialism are being collectively studied and takes inspiration from Shreyansh Jain and Smita Jha's study.⁴

The article can be seen as consisting of four sections: the first section establishes a theoretical foundation for existentialism, liminality, and psychosocial identity, the second section scrutinizes the protagonist's isolated childhood and need for approval, the second section analyses the liminoid performance of Naruto in the form of his battle with pain, and the fourth section carries out an Eriksonian analysis of Naruto's eventual identity formation.

Liminality and Existentialism: A Framework

Arnold van Gennep introduced the concept of liminality in his work *Rites of Passage*, referring to the way of life of certain tribal communities.⁵ He explained it as a transitional phase from one social status to another, marked by predefined rituals and rites, as practiced among tribals throughout the different parts of the world. In this process, liminality represents the middle stage and signifies the ambiguous, uncertain experiences that occur between two statuses (pre- and post-liminal). While for van Gennep, this idea remained limited to indigenous tribal norms, Victor Turner borrowed it and expanded its applicability to culture, society, and politics, highlighting its significance in contemporary times.⁶ He takes liminality out of its mandatory, ritualistic norms and observes it in the light of universal temporalities and in-betweenness, as seen in phenomena such as adolescence, death ceremonies, marriage altars, immigration, dusk, and LGBTQ+ experiences, among others. These statuses define not fixities but transitory or marginalized spaces that society fails to put into its customs, norms, or codes. Van Gennep explains liminality as a space and time when societal rules and customs are suspended, and a person must navigate an uncertain, unknown trajectory on one's own till one reaches the other edge. It is because of this reason, Turner observes liminal beings as 'unstructured existence' which is "antithetic (and potentially polluting) to 'normal' society."⁷ In this regard, Thomas writes:

In the liminal phase, a neophyte is like a tabula rasa, a clean slate where the knowledge and wisdom of the group is written down with regard to the new status ... The uniqueness of this stage consists in suspending the rules, rights and regulations. This

Jain and Smita Jha, 'The Bildungsroman Trope and Indian Consciousness in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008)', *Archiv Orientální*, vol. 93, no. 1 (2025), pp. 89–107. At: <https://doi.org/10.47979/aror.j.93.1.89-107>.

⁴ Shreyansh Jain and Smita Jha, 'Exploring the Intersection of Liminality and Identity Formation in S. B. Divya's *Meru* (2023)', *HyperCultura*, vol. 13 (2024), pp. 1–13.

⁵ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁶ Victor Turner. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); Victor Turner. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁷ Rhys Owain Thomas, *Liminal Identity in Contemporary American Television Science Fiction* (PhD Dissertation: University of East Anglia, 2014), p. 50.

situation has both pros and cons: on the one hand, adepts are weakened because they have no rights; on the other hand, they are exempted from duties.⁸

The very suspension of regulations, while making one precarious, also opens a freedom of limitless possibilities and potential for one's personal identity. Liminality thus becomes a fertile ground for protagonists' identity formation in many anime series, such as the eponymous character in *Naruto*, Asta in *Black Clover*, among others. The very identity of these characters is constructed through challenging the status quo. They resist and revolutionize their respective societies so that they (as marginalized or ostracized) can also be accommodated in a particular social order. Therefore, liminality, while carrying a negative connotation of being the Other, also contains "boundless, potentially infinitely limitless" possibilities and opportunities. Such possibilities have also been equated with the adolescent stage of identity formation, which stands between childhood and adulthood, a kind of in-betweenness.⁹

Further, since in contemporary liberal societies, individuals can have their own unique passage of identity formation which might not fit into any group characteristics, Turner introduced the term liminoidality to refer to an individual's specific liminal qualities and persona. While liminality is a group characteristic, liminoidality refers to the exclusivity of a liminal being, who should find his/her own unique way to personal identity formation. In the primary subject of this study, the *Naruto* anime series, we observe the eponymous character grappling with liminoid status and analyse his identity through a developmental lens, focusing on his existential search for meaning.

Aligning with the central aim, the article is situated at the intersection of liminality and existentialism. Existentialism posits that there is no external, predestined, or predetermined purpose to human existence; instead, individuals must find meaning within the indifferent universe of uncertainty with an anticipation of the inevitable approach of death.¹⁰ The process of finding meaning itself indicates a period of transition, confusion, indecision, and self-discovery, during which a person is defining the purpose of one's life. In his theory of identity development, Erik Erikson observes this phenomenon as an identity crisis,¹¹ defining it as a moratorium (an unaccounted delay) in reaching maturity, signifying the emergence of a new person out of the old childhood identification that a child would relate to as an influence of one's parents or society.¹² When we observe this process of self-discovery and identity formation through the lens of van Gennep's and Turner's ideas of liminality, we gain deeper insights into identity and its potential, particularly for marginalized groups and individuals. Thus, the article is built on the premise that the liminal state of in-betweenness, encompassing identities, roles, and work, does not remain merely a social threshold; rather, it becomes an Eriksonian crisis of limitless existential possibilities, offering individual freedom and experimentation with multiple ideologies during adolescence. In this way, the pervasive

⁸ Thomas, *Liminal Identity in Contemporary American Television Science Fiction*, p. 50.

⁹ Jain and Jha, 'Exploring the Intersection of Liminality and Identity Formation in S. B. Divya's *Meru* (2023)'.

¹⁰ Ian H. Langford, 'An Existential Approach to Risk Perception', *Risk Analysis*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2002): pp. 101—120.

¹¹ For Erikson, an identity crisis is a very significant event in personal identity formation. It disturbs the complacent childhood attitude of an adolescent toward oneself and the world, and forces one to analyse his/her beliefs, eventually leading to the formation of a fresh perspective.

¹² Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (London: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 156.

ambiguity of the liminal phase mirrors the absurdity of existentialism. In both cases, one does not remain what one was before, yet is simultaneously unsure of what one will become. One is suspended in a confounded state and must explore and choose a direction, amidst an unknown confusion, for one's way of life. Erikson refers to this confused state as 'identity crisis,' a necessary step in the process of identity formation, which aims to intensify self-awareness regarding the purpose of life, identity, and authenticity. In this way, the employed synergistic liminal-existential framework reveals identity as a constant negotiation between societal values and subjective meaning-making.

Existential Search for Meaning in *Naruto*

Given the mountainous textual availability, the article offers an analysis of specific episodes that cover important events regarding the protagonist's identity and existential concerns, from the very first episode of the series onward. The pilot episode of *Naruto* opens with the eponymous character playing mischievous tricks by drawing graffiti and vandalizing the sacred mountain faces of past Hokages (leaders) of Leaf Village.¹³ Despite severe scoldings and minor punishments from seniors, he continues to be a non-compliant child in his ninja training academy. The question that becomes prominent is, why does he act this way? The viewer finds the answer in the first couple of episodes: Naruto's behavior reflects his need for attention from the people around him. He is treated as an outsider by the people of the village because his body is the host of a nine-tailed fox (Kurama), a powerful demon fox, of which he is unaware. It is this dismissal of his complete persona in Leaf Village that leads Naruto, even from a young age, to crave recognition and to be in a constant existential crisis. In this way, Naruto Uzumaki's early life is defined by rejection and loneliness. This suffering is both external, in the form of social exclusion, and internal, as he grapples with his identity and purpose later as an adolescent. It is this inherent desire of existential acceptance in society and seeking an innate meaning of his life that Naruto in a brazen child-like manner repeatedly announces to become a Hokage one day throughout the series, as in the pilot episode itself, he says, "Because I am going to be greater than any of them. Me. Naruto, the next Hokage, a ninja legend. Then, everyone will have to stop disrespecting me and look up to me. Believe it."¹⁴ Thus, Naruto's dream functions as an expression of self-worth and also a way to make meaning in a society that shuns him.

The Pain arc of *Naruto Shippuden*¹⁵ (episodes 152—169) is the most poignant moment for Naruto's identity and his changing comprehension of the world. This long arc revolves around the phenomenology of pain as an aspect of suffering and its presence in the anime's universe, given the inevitable facet of war. In the very beginning of *Shippuden*, we are introduced to Nagato, also known as Pain, an essential member of an allegedly terrorist organisation called Akatsuki, whose acts of chaos are notoriously famous to the Shinobi (ninja) world. At the core of this arc lies the idea that pain is a force that teaches individuals empathy and thus shapes their perspective and actions. For Nagato, it is seen as a way to establish some

¹³ Hayato Date (Executive Producer), *Naruto* (Tokyo: Studio Pierrot, 2002–2007).

¹⁴ Date, *Naruto*.

¹⁵ The *Naruto* saga is divided into two series. His childhood is covered in *Naruto* (2002—2007) and his subsequent life is detailed in *Naruto Shippuden* (2007—2017).

kind of peace in the Ninja world by making people suffer and make them develop empathy. In the story, Nagato's pain is both personal, with the death of his parents and friends, and collective, as he watches the broad devastation and suffering brought by war. His own unbearable pain leads Nagato to believe that genuine peace can only be found via the shared experience of agony in the diegetic cyclic universe of suffering, as he puts it:

If there is justice in vengeance, then justice will only breed more vengeance and trigger a cycle of hatred. We are living in the middle of such a phenomenon right now. We know what the past has been and we can predict what the future will be. That is history as we know it, so we cannot help but believe that human beings are incapable of understanding each other. The world of the ninjas is ruled by hatred.¹⁶

This is the fundamental premise for Nagato's transition into Pain, which exemplifies a phenomenological change in which pain is externalized and used to attain a perceived greater goal: peace. Nagato's view that pain is the only way to affect change emphasizes the dichotomy of suffering as both destructive and constructive, as Jean-Paul Sartre remarks in his *Being and Nothingness* (1993).

It is a utopian vision in the same sense as Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018): both the villains envision a post-apocalyptic utopian society for the greater good, beyond the general moral grounds upon which humanity functions, but end up creating, if not a dystopia, a barren, hopeless world. In *Naruto*, Nagato attacks the Leaf Village and completely wipes out its existence, annihilating everything in sight with his impressive powers. This can be compared to what Žižek has called 'divine violence,' a judgment that does not differentiate between the innocent and the culprit and punishes everyone the same in order to annihilate an existing politico-social structure, giving way to a new one, which, hopefully, might be a peaceful one¹⁷. In episodes 166-168 of *Naruto: Shippuden*, the following conversation between Nagato and Naruto occurs:

Pain: The world will know real pain. The fear instilled by that pain would prevent wars, and the world would be on the road to stability and peace.

Naruto: But that kind of peace, it's nothing but a fake!

Pain: Humans are not the most intelligent of creatures. This is the only way that peace can be achieved. After several decades, that pain too will eventually fade with time. It will no longer be a deterrent, and humanity will begin to battle once more. This time, they themselves will use the Tailed Beast Weapon against one another and reconfirm what true pain is. And then peace will be restored again, for a time. In the course of this endless cycle of hatred, Pain will give rise to momentary peace. That is my dream.¹⁸

This exposure to the duality of destruction and construction in the nature of wars stimulate ethical questions in Naruto's conscience. Nagato's emotive narration exemplifies the unrecognized suffering that results from wars in the modern atomic world among nations in the hopes of utopian peace. It is for this reason that Pain's question to Naruto functions as an

¹⁶ Masashi Kishimoto (Executive Producer), *Naruto: Shippuden*, Studio Pierrot (2007–2017).

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Picador, 2008), p. 196.

¹⁸ Kishimoto, *Naruto: Shippuden*.

identity crisis, as he highlights that I, too, am trying to attain peace. While different titles and ranks in the Shinobi (soldier) world, such as Genin, Chunin, Jonin, Anbu, Sannin, and Sage, are glorified, celebrating the victories and war heroes, the resultant public suffering is not even a matter of diegetic discussion till the long-drawn-out fight between Naruto and Nagato (the Pain).

Thus, the ultimate battle between Nagato and Naruto is not only a battle of politics and power, but also of philosophies and will, and, fascinatingly, concludes not with the eventual killing and pessimism but with Nagato's self-realization and self-sacrifice for the revival of Leaf Village. Learning from the sage Jiraya's life lessons, Naruto's formidable commitment toward peace and betterment, despite his inherent skepticism, introduced Nagato to the future possibility of a world of peace, which would not be found upon suffering or pain, as he speaks, "I have a feeling that, unlike me, you will walk towards a different future. I think I shall believe in you, Naruto Uzumaki".¹⁹ This fight of philosophies coerces Naruto to rethink and question his 'ninja way'; thus, he faces an existential break in his life (or what Erik Erikson calls 'identity crisis) and renegotiates his ideals. When Pain questions him, "How would you confront this hatred in order to create peace? I want to hear your answer".²⁰ And Naruto's response reflects the internal conflict and indecisiveness, "I don't have an answer to something like that".²¹

Harnessing Kurama: Practicing Liminoidality in a Liminal Body

As a consequence of their boundless, potentially infinitely limitless nature, liminal characters are often perceived as dangerous and/or socially poisonous ... Ironically, it is the involuntary withdrawal from society that makes them (liminal people) perfectly suited to the act of observing it, commenting upon it, and even 'working through' problematic concerns and offering theoretical solutions.²²

In the liminal state, a person remains in a continuum of identity confusion, existential questions, and ontological uncertainty. When this trope is observed within identity developmental theory, the Eriksonian moratorium stretches far longer than necessary due to society's rejection of the individual. Since society does not provide space for such individuals to thrive, they are forced to challenge the very social norms and create their own space. Their in-between ambiguous state is not restricted to social boundaries; the 'involuntary withdrawal from society,' while making them vulnerable, also gives people the freedom to experiment, experience, and express themselves in ways that people tied within social norms and codes are not allowed. In this way, liminality possesses infinite possibilities of one's identity due to the digressive freedom of its very nature. Therefore, the liminal phase is equal to the Eriksonian identity crisis and uncertainty when "Ambiguity reigns; people and public policies may be judged skeptically in relation to deep values; the vices, follies, stupidities, and abuses of contemporary holders of

¹⁹ Kishimoto, *Naruto: Shippuden*, ep. 174.

²⁰ Kishimoto, *Naruto: Shippuden*, ep. 166.

²¹ Kishimoto, *Naruto: Shippuden*.

²² Thomas, 'Liminal Identity in Contemporary American Television Science Fiction', p. 50.

high political, economic, or religious status may be satirised, ridiculed, or contemned in terms of axiomatic values.”²³

Naruto Uzumaki, at his core, is a liminal figure. As the *jinchūriki*²⁴ of the Nine-Tails Fox (Kurama), he is caught at the threshold between human and monster, between belonging and exclusion. Ostracized in society and symbolically polluted, Naruto is outside the normative framework of the Hidden Leaf Village, yet simultaneously not quite outside it. This liminal existence reflects the existential condition of abandonment articulated by Sartre, where the individual is ‘condemned to be free’ and must constitute himself in the absence of pre-existing moral and social guarantees. Naruto’s mantra of becoming Hokage is not simply a goal but an existential imperative: it is a statement of self-authorship in a world that denies him essence.

Liminality heightens Naruto’s existential struggle by locating him in perpetual conditions of becoming, rather than being. Naruto’s training cycles, battles, and moral dilemmas are all rites of passage that are never fully completed, echoing Turner’s concept of liminality as a zone of ambiguity, exposure, and conversion. However, it is important to note that Naruto’s ethical agency—his decision not to leave Sasuke (his childhood friend), his choice not to seek revenge (on Pain), and his adoption of empathy—represents existential responsibility. Naruto’s identity functions not in accordance with destiny but in opposition to it, thus converting liminal ambiguity into ethical action. This intersection is not particular to Naruto but is instead a common thread in anime storytelling. In *Demon Slayer*,²⁵ Tanjiro Kamado’s sister, Nezuko, occupies a liminal position between humanity and monstrosity. Like Naruto, Tanjiro’s ethical self is constituted through existential decision rather than ontological classification. Tanjiro resists the human-versus-demon dichotomy and chooses empathy in a world of violence. His belief in his sister’s liminality—familial, ethical, and bodily—is instead the site for meaning-making rather than meaninglessness. Equally, characters like Eren Yeager from *Attack on Titan* (Araki 2013-2023) and Shinji Ikari from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Anno 1995-1996) exemplify the darker side of existential/liminal paths. Eren’s liminality leads to nihilism, while Shinji’s paralysis represents the existential fear of freedom without direction. These examples highlight that liminality does not necessarily lead to transcendence but only to the subject’s existence under the weight of choice.

Kurama’s (the nine tailed beast) manifestation through Naruto’s body is dependent on the mental and physical state of Naruto, and at times, in the event of sheer rage, it manifests itself in its monstrous physical form. Thus, Naruto is not human enough for the villagers of Leaf Village to accept him as one of their own, but he is not a complete demon either, since he is biologically human. The liminal body, in this way, becomes a medium for its exclusion from society, but also a means of creating its own unique identity. While the whole world rejects and renounces the presence of the demon-fox within him, Naruto tries to understand it and respects it as part of his own self. The psychological struggle and negotiation with the nine-tailed inner fox is depicted by taking the viewers into a psychological liminal space inside Naruto’s mind, where the demon self and Naruto’s inner self are separated by a sealed fence that cannot be broken by the demon fox.²⁶ This liminal psychological space actually becomes

²³ Quoted in Thomas, ‘Liminal Identity in Contemporary American Television Science Fiction’, p. 157.

²⁴ Refers to individuals who have tailed beasts imprisoned within their bodies.

²⁵ Koyouharu Gotouge (Author). *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* [television series]. Ufotable (2019–2024).

²⁶ For visual confirmation, see *Naruto Shippuden*’s episode 166.

a significant foundation for Naruto to accept his biological body. Despite all doubts and rejections, even from the great sages and leaders of the leaf village, he chooses to embrace Kurama as part of his biological reality and uses its powers to overcome Pain, eventually creating a harmonious union by the end of the series.

The central epiphanic moment in the series happens during Naruto's battle with Pain. Naruto's half-demonized body is captured by Pain in his planetary devastation technique, which forms a powerful gravity core that pulls in the surrounding area, imprisoning creatures inside a massive orb. When all hope is lost, and only darkness prevails on the screen, the viewers are given access to Naruto's mindscape, displaying on the screen the internal conflict Naruto is going through. In *Shippuden's* episode 168, the characters include Naruto's dead father, Kurama, and Naruto himself:

Naruto: What am I supposed to do? I don't know anymore. Someone, help me. Give me an answer [to the question Pain asked]²⁷

His father (Fourth Hokage): In order to save something dear, wars are waged. As long as there is love, there will be hatred ... To be a Ninja is to confront hatred. Each and every one of us battles hatred. Jiraiya Sensei trusted you to find a way to end this hatred ... I know you will find the answer. I have faith in you.²⁸

It is right after this internal struggle and conflict that Naruto regains his confidence and control over his body, emerging in his human form and standing over the large orb. However, this does not constitute the resolution of the conflict, rather its understanding; his doubts and internal turmoil have abated, implying that he has synthesized reality with his ego and decided to talk it out with Pain. This harnessing of Kurama's powers by Naruto also represents a victory over his own body; the liminal negative is harnessed to create something positive. Kurama's incessant energy is being redirected toward fighting the battle with Pain. Inferentially, it is the very liminality of his being that Naruto is able to eventually form his unique identity as a great shinobi and is accepted reverently in the Leaf Village.

Victor Turner expanded the theory of liminality in great detail and applied it to the construction of identity in the modern individual. The contemporary neoliberal individual carries a diverse value system and different ways of constructing their own identity, so the paths toward personal identity differ significantly. In this case, the predefined rites of passage are not a fixed order but rather a metaphor for the transitional period as an in-between state. Consequently, Turner introduces the term liminoidality to refer to the individualized passage of identity, which confers significance on unconventional experiences and entities that might otherwise be ignored or rebuffed by pre-established social norms. So, while liminality is a group characteristic, liminoidality is an individualistic element. Therefore, Naruto is a liminoid; he is treated as a freak by other children for being so. But his liminoidality functions as an opportunity to prove his worth as he is able to harness Kurama, an act nobody could have thought possible. Even Pain is shocked to see Naruto back in his human form after rhetorically self-questioning, "Does he now have control over Nine-Tails?"²⁹ Consequently, Naruto's

²⁷ The question was "How would you confront this hatred in order to create peace?"

²⁸ Kishimoto, *Naruto: Shippuden*.

²⁹ Kishimoto, *Naruto: Shippuden*.

liminal body functions as a site for his strength and identity formation. Harnessing Kurama is an expression of his growing ego, as well as the mutual harmony and respect that Naruto and Kurama developed throughout the series.

In this way, Naruto's path exemplifies Jean-Paul Sartre's idea that "existence precedes essence," as he forges his own identity and purpose through his actions and decisions rather than inheriting them at birth or by fate.³⁰ Naruto's drive for recognition evolves into a deeper resolve to defend the people he cares about and build a society where others do not have to endure what he did. This metamorphosis emphasises the existential idea that meaning is not fixed but rather something people construct through their connections and contributions to the greater good.

Identity Formation and Acceptance

In the fifth stage of his psychosocial developmental theory, Erik Erikson defines the formation of personal identity as a renegotiation of the ideological stance adopted in childhood. Adolescence is a stage of life when a child is no longer completely dependent on their parents, has developed some self-esteem, and exhibits quasi-autonomy in their behavior. As a result, a person is inevitably exposed to different ideologies, ideas, and ways of being rather than the only one with which s/he has been inculcated since birth. This provides a child with multiple possibilities for oneself and the plurality of one's personality, provoking meaningful questioning of present self-belief and, in certain cases, of society as well³¹. Naruto's encounter with Pain and the above-mentioned discussion highlight this renegotiation and the confusion that accompanies it. Erikson coined the term 'identity crisis' to describe the state of doubt, confusion, and indecision associated with this stage of personality. Remarking on this, he writes,

It occurs in that period of the life cycle when each youth must forge for himself some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood; he must detect some meaningful resemblance between what he has come to see in himself and what his sharpened awareness tells him others judge and expect him to be³².

In this way, beyond physical development, identity is inherently a psychological formation of will, as exemplified in the previous section. The battle of philosophical and ideological insights, often not given significance in the case, is far more prominent between Pain and Naruto than their physical sparring. This fundamental impetus gives rise to deeper consideration of the significance of Kurama attached to Naruto's body, his liminality, and his clash with Pain. Kurama is a tangible embodiment of a negative shadow beyond the mere physical appearance. The fox symbolises the darker sides of Naruto's personality, such as his wrath, loneliness, and resentment, which he must face and work through to form his personal

³⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

³¹ Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, p. 246.

³² Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 1958), p. 14.

identity. Further, it can also be seen as a reified symbol of the undeniable duality of good and bad in every human being. As Kurama is inextricably linked to Naruto's body, emotions like loneliness, depression, resentment, hatred, and so on are also fundamental aspects of human personality. The mutual empathetic understanding between Pain and Naruto also symbolizes a victory over his own pain and loneliness, which simultaneously coincides with harnessing Kurama. The whole arc changes Naruto's worldview and his destiny. When he returns to the village after the fight, the whole Leaf Village is crowded with welcoming him; it's the end of his crisis, doubts, and the so-called pre-destined life cycle.

The Nine-Tails' taming and eventual acceptance represent Naruto's path towards individuation, wherein he confronts, and there is an eventual peace with his shadow self by the end of *Naruto Shippuden*. As a result, the question 'Who am I?' in the context of Naruto is a more profound existential investigation into the essence of existence than mere identification. For example, the ninja mask worn by Kakashi represents the social and psychological obstacles that must be surmounted on the path to self-discovery. We can observe how the series navigates the complexities of selfhood by examining the philosophical foundations of characters. In this case, the unveiling of the true self necessitates not only rejecting false identities but also facing one's darkest psychological tendencies with courage. By doing this, *Naruto* gives viewers a thorough understanding of what it means to genuinely find oneself through a story that is intimately connected to existential beliefs.

Additionally, it should be noted that, unlike Erikson's theory of identity formation, which was developed based on 1950s American youth identity and emphasizes separation from childhood identification, Naruto's identity is formed through connections and relationships rather than separation. Theoretical interventions into this idea have already been carried out.³³ In the absence of any parental support and reinforcement, Naruto's personal identity is formed by his interactions, relationships, and bonds with different characters, such as Sasuke, Pain, Jiraya, and Gaara (another *jinchūriki*).

In the end, Naruto's identity also works as a resistance toward the popular notion of Shinobi and Ninja. His personal identity is not formed in the image of the conventional, quintessential image of a Shinobi of secrecy, detachment, and ruthlessness as exemplified by Itachi, a great Shinobi who assassinated his whole community for the welfare of the village; rather, introducing a novel way of being one by acknowledging the shared trauma of Pain and Gaara, converts his enemies through empathy, and hinders the cycle of revenge by showing his own stance toward peace and nations in front of Pain. Naruto's stance against any kind of hereditary determinism and his celebration of the personal struggle in the meaning-making of one's life further exemplify his unique personality in the series, as he announces, "No matter how great the pain is, I will continue walking because that's who Naruto is!"³⁴

³³ Jane Kroger, 'Commentary on 'Feminist Perspectives on Erikson's Theory: Their Relevance for Contemporary Identity Development Research', *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2002): p. 3; Charles Levine, 'Women, Men, and Persons: A Response to "Feminist Perspectives on Erikson's Theory: Their Relevance for Contemporary Identity Development Research"', *Identity*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2002): p. 3 Jain and Jha, 'The Bildungsroman Trope and Indian Consciousness in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008)', pp. 89–107.

³⁴ Kishimoto, *Naruto: Shippuden*, ep. 174.

Conclusion

Naruto's journey and life development throughout the anime reflect a profound human condition in the multicultural, globalized world. It highlights the intolerance and prejudice societies carry into their inherent social and cultural norms in the form of regionalism and cultural superiority, abhorring anyone or anything that does not fit into the abstract concept of normalcy, such as women, migrants, refugees, blacks, and so on. This article thus extends this thesis, highlighting how a deviant adolescent identity developed despite societal repression. The theory of liminality centrally addresses deviant, digressive personalities who cannot fit into any structure and remain at the threshold, carrying the potential to challenge and revolutionize society. Revolutionary change is rather an inevitable requirement for such characters to prove their worth and form their identity. Thus, identity formation in contemporary anime, such as *Naruto*, *Hunter X Hunter*, *Black Clover*, and *Demon Slayer*, does not remain merely a matter of personal maturity but also involves political maturity, aiming toward the welfare and betterment of society, paralleling the protagonist's personal identity formation.