



HISTORY REVISITED: A STUDY INTO SHEHAN KARUNATILAKA'S *THE SEVEN MOONS OF MAALI ALMEIDA*

Divyanshi Nayal¹, Dr.Kumar Gaurav^{2*}

Abstract:

South Asian literature, especially Sri Lankan literature, is often regarded much the same as the Indian literature. Therefore, it creates a lack of awareness and recognition of the Sri Lankan identity by the Western world. Because it is thought of as the same as the Indian narrative Shehan Karunatilaka's novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* successfully voices the story and history of Sri Lanka and its people. Therefore this paper aims to examine and analyse the 2022 Booker Prize Winner *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka in the light of new historicism, the historicity of the text, and the textuality of history. While the 1980s saw the development of New Historicism, which gained substantial popularity in the 1990s and beyond owing largely to the critic Stephen Greenblatt's work. The two main objectives of new historicists are to comprehend a work within its broader historical context and to comprehend culture while also using literature to explore intellectual and cultural history. The article's primary discussions centre on Shehan Karunatilaka, New Historicism, historical representation, the historicity and textuality of the work.

Keywords: New Historicism, history, the textuality of history, the historicity of the text, Shehan Karunatilaka

¹Department Of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India.

^{2*}Assistant Professor, Department Of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India. Email: Kumargaurav.26619@Lpu.Co.In

***Corresponding Author:** - Dr.Kumar Gaurav

*Assistant Professor, Department Of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India.
Email: Kumargaurav.26619@Lpu.Co.In

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Introduction

Sri Lankan writer Nixon in her article, "*Why We Need More Diversity in South Asian Representation*" touches on the subject of the lack of distinctive identity of the South Asian countries in the Western world, where other countries are equated to the Indian identity. She observes that the seldom seen non-Indian South Asian stories are few and far between and are frequently incorrectly perceived as Indian books by readers and publishers, or they are not "South Asian enough" since they do not correspond with the usual storyline. "As Adiba Jaigirdar points out, "I will often see readers labeling my characters Indian, or labeling me Indian...It can sometimes feel like you're writing into a void, that no matter how much work you put into writing your experience of your very specific South Asian culture, people will try to lump it all together to fit into their preconceived stereotypes." There's also an additional misidentification of Middle Eastern and Arab characters as South Asian, and vice versa, that complicates this problem further" (Nixon). Further, in the article, "What ails Sri Lankan Literature," Dissanayake points out that, "what is coming out in Sri Lanka today as literature is pathetic. It is a crime against our environment to waste so much paper and get people to pay exorbitant prices to buy such books."

Therefore, by winning the prestigious Booker Award 2022 the Sri Lankan writer, Shehan Karunatilaka has successfully managed to bring out the Sri Lankan voice to the world. On top of that, he is able to educate about Sri Lanka and its complexities without taking strong political views. Karunatilaka is best known for his novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It was first released as *Chats with the Dead* on the Indian subcontinent in 2015. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* was released in 2022 by the British publisher Sort Of Books in an altered edition that was intended to be more user-friendly for Western consumers. Karunatikala's book does not wallow in sympathy despite dealing with some of the most difficult sociopolitical and human issues. He doesn't want the reader to feel bad for his country; all he wants is for them to realise that no war is ever fought in a vacuum (Khan).

The literary fiction book combines aspects of magical realism and historical fiction to tell the tale of a man who, during the Sri Lankan Civil War, is trying to reconcile his life and death. The book is written in the second person perspective intentionally as it encourages the reader to place themselves in the position of the titular main

character to testimonials throughout the text from varying perspectives on Sri Lankan civil war demarcated with different debates in history. Karunatilaka wants the reader to walk away with something. It's written in a way for the audience that might not be predisposed to its content but more than just a piece of education it is an exquisitely entertaining novel. It's a satire that usually does not condescend in the way that satire does. Karunatilaka through his character questions, "Wanna know why I think Lanaka is cursed?" (Karunatilaka 139).

According to *New World Encyclopedia*, the term "new history" was borrowed from the French phrase "nouvelle histoire," which was popularised in the 1970s and was notably linked with the historians Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora. The movement is related to *histoire des mentalités*, *histoire des représentations*, and *histoire culturelle*. Even though there may not be a clear definition, the new history is best understood in contrast to earlier historical writing techniques, which rejected their emphasis on politics and "great men," their insistence on creating a historical narrative, their emphasis on administrative documents as essential source materials, their concern with people's motivations and intentions as explanatory factors for historical events, and their willingness to embrace the prospect of historians' objectivity.

Therefore, the literary school referred to as "New Historicism" asserts that literature must be evaluated and viewed in the light of the respective writer's and the critic's histories. In addition to accepting that any piece of literature is moulded by its author's times and circumstances, New Historicism admits that the critic's critique of the text is shaped by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices. It is based on Stephen Greenblatt's literary criticism and draws from Michel Foucault's philosophy. A New Historicist examines literature in the context of a more extensive historical timeline, looking at how the author's times both influenced and were reflected in the work, while also admitting the influence of contemporary cultural circumstances on that critic's conclusion.

The Historicity of the Text

The critic is, likewise with New Historicism, bound by his historicity. Unintentionally incorporating his own opinions that reflect the diversity of history, a critic applies them when he evaluates a passage in a work (Jie-xiu). According to new historicists, the moment in which a historical text was written, including books,

novels, works of literature, documents, and folklore, had an impact on it.

A literary work should be viewed as the result of its particular historical, geographic, and temporal context. Additionally, writers interpret historical events in their writing based on their perspectives and experiences. Due to this, it is important to look at the psychological background, social environment, and any works or theories that the writers may have been impacted by.

Born in 1975, in Galle, southern Sri Lanka Shehan Karunatilaka was brought up in Colombo. In defiance of his family's wishes for him to pursue business administration, he earned his degree in English literature. He received his education at S. Thomas' Preparatory School in Kollupitiya, Sri Lanka, and afterwards at Massey University and Whanganui Collegiate School in New Zealand completing his BA and post-graduation. Additionally, he played bass in the band Independent Square. Later he began his career as an advertising copywriter. Also, he lived and worked in London, Amsterdam, and Singapore before returning to Colombo.

In an interview titled, *'Writers all want to be rock stars': Booker winner Shehan Karunatilaka on ghosts, war and childish dreams*, Shehan shares that he feels pleased with himself for blending in quick speeches in Tamil and Sinhalese during the Booker ceremony. While everyone spoke English at home, his parents were Sinhalese speakers. His children speak three languages, and he is teaching them Tamil. "It was important to me that I was able to speak in those two languages." Regarding Sri Lanka's cricket team's recent defeat, he made a joke. In addition, he stated, "All Sri Lankans: let's keep telling our stories. And let's keep sharing our stories and listening to the stories of others."

In a 2022 interview with the *Guardian*, Shehan revealed that didn't feel comfortable revisiting the 1983 riots or the beginning of the conflict since "I'm not part of the people who suffered," but he does remember what happened in 1989. Although Karunatilaka claims to have been "insulated" from the worst of the conflict while growing up in middle-class Colombo in the late 1980s, he nevertheless clearly recalls the curfews, schools closing, and his mother ordering him to turn away from bodies or burning tyres in the streets. He claims that his spouse, whose family was a plantation family, experienced the conflict far more brutally. He states that the fact that this period has been extensively chronicled, in his opinion, people haven't emotionally processed it. "Those

with memories avoid discussing them. Since we typically just move on in Sri Lanka, we should write about it and attempt to make sense of it. Going back 30 years also felt "much safer," as he notes, because so few of the people were still alive. He claims that none of the factions are real.

In an article titled, "Reading Guide: The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida by Shehan Karunatilaka", Karunatilaka stated, "1989 was the darkest year in my memory, where there was an ethnic war, a Marxist uprising, a foreign military presence and state counter-terror squads. It was a time of assassinations, disappearances, bombs and corpses. But by the end of the 1990s, most of the antagonists were dead, so I felt safer writing about these ghosts, rather than those closer to the present."

There are plenty of real-life characters in the novel. Karunatilaka admits that he did draw the titular character, Maali Almeida after 1990 homicide victim Richard de Zoysa. He was a middle-class, English-speaking activist from Colombo, and his murder is still unsolved. Maali afterwards became a combat photographer and a gambler, nevertheless. They both shared the trait of being openly gay guys, which was unusual for Sri Lanka in 1989 and made them similar (Syed). Dr. Ranee Sridharan, a top authority in the *In Between* was inspired by Rajani Thiranagama, a physician and anatomy professor at the University of Jaffna's department of medicine, who was the inspiration for the character of Dr. Ranee. Dissident and opponent of the violent separatist Tamil Tigers, Thiranagama was murdered by them in 1989. The *In Between* is populated by ghosts of persons who were killed by the government, the Sinhalese Marxist insurgency, and other parties in addition to the Tigers, like Dr. Ranee.

Also, Karunatilaka claimed in an interview that he used the true names of evil individuals. The fact that real-life Ministers Cyril Matthew, Ranjan Wijeratne, and Udugampola are generally suspected of being responsible for the murders of Tamil civilians, JVP Che Guevarists, and the LTTE break-off Karuna group that turned on Prabhakaran won't be lost on readers. "I am Major Raja Udugampola of the Sri Lankan army. I have given a press statement. Almeida was employed as an army photographer from 1984 till 1987. I have never met asshole personally. He has had no dealings with the army for the past three years. If you call again, I will massacre you (Karunatilaka 219). In addition, the character of Sena is based on a real-life person, Daya Pathirana was a student

activist who was abducted and tortured and killed in 1986. "I am Sena Pathirana. I was the chief JVP organiser for Gampha. My body was dumped in this filthy lake many moons ago (Karunatilaka 21). "I have no boss. I am Sena Pathirana, JVP organiser for Gampha district" (Karunatilaka 91).

According to Professor S. Ratnajeewan H. Hoole in *A Contrarian Review: The Seven Moons Of Maali Almeida*, there are also factual errors. Karunatilaka claims that the IPKF punished Jaffna Hospital for the crime of treating the LTTE, even though LTTE intentionally shot at the IPKF and the retaliation fire is what killed several hospital employees. He takes particular offence at Mahatiya (Col. Gopalasamy of the LTTE), who it is claimed had a lover in disobedience of Prabhakaran's instructions, despite the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, he was happily married to a former Tiger woman.

According to Karunatilaka, Mahathaya was put to death by drowning when the tide crept in by being placed in a tunnel by the beach. However, it is commonly known that he was detained in 1993, transported to Mankulam during the 1995–96 displacement, and killed by firing squad alongside some of the other detainees after telling his wife Yogeswari (nickname Kalpana), a former Tigress.

The Textuality of History

A literary text can be examined or translated using the textuality technique. Textuality has the ability to broaden a text's meaning and change its perspective by fusing the perspectives of the author and the reader. With the support of its learner's ability to discern the structure as well as the texture of the text, which provides a sense of the sentence's logical progression, textuality strives to enable a more thorough comprehension of the culture (Jie-xiu). By the textuality of histories, Montrose meant that people:

Have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question—traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social process of preservation and effacement (Greenblatt & Gunn 331).

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merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement...(Houlb 176).

Sri Lanka underwent an appalling civil war from 1983 until 2009. While there were many participants in this war, it was essentially an ethnic dispute. The Sinhalese-dominated government in Sri Lanka had long persecuted the Tamil minority. This tyranny includes multiple massacres after the collapse of the British empire in 1948 and the start of the Civil War. These ethnic differences have their roots in colonial times when Tamils and Sinhalese were both subjected to oppression by British imperialism. The power vacuum in post-colonial Sri Lanka led to the majority Sinhalese populace seizing control and reviving colonial atrocities.

The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) was founded in 1976 by Prabhakaran with a vision of establishing a homeland for Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east. Elsa tells Maali, "Most of our projects are up north or out east. The LTTE are the government out there. You know this already (Karunatilaka 110). The LTTE organisation made their first attack against an army patrol in Tirunelveli, Jaffna, in July 1983. After 13 soldiers were killed, the majority community turned its anger towards Tamil civilians. The LTTE initially concentrated on defeating rival Tamil groups and establishing itself as the lone voice of the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Likewise, Karunatilaka mentions, "Elsa lamented that the LTTE had become fascism, stifling other Tamil voices" (Karunatilaka 111). By 1986, the exact same year it conquered Jaffna, this had been achieved ("The Sri Lankan Civil War").

On the island, the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was dispatched in an effort to maintain peace. This decision turned out to be a disastrous mistake. Stanley, DD's father utters, about the IPKF, "'These are foreign devils,'. He Looks over to Elsa, 'Invited by our own fools'" (Karunatilaka 128). Maali's beloved DD and Jaki also discuss that, "The Indian Peace Keeping Force carried out two massacres of civilians this year. One was in a hospital. Malinda was in Jaffna on our commission when this happened (Karunatilaka 127). The Indian army ultimately engaged the Eelam group in combat rather than trying to negotiate an accord between both parties. In the war, about 1200 Indian men perished. The LTTE also claimed responsibility for the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, who was killed at an electoral rally in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu, by a human bomb

("The Sri Lankan Civil War"). Maali captured, "...the picture of hospital beds piled with dead doctors and nurses, punished by the Indian Peace Keeping Force for the crime of treating wounded LTTE fighters" (Karunatilaka 128).

Fighting increased in ferocity when the IPKF withdrew in 1990. Premadasa, the president of Sri Lanka, died in a human bombing by the LTTE in 1993. At its height, the LTTE was a fully-fledged militia with its air force. It used women and even kids in its operations. Both sides continued to commit innumerable atrocities and cruel acts as the war dragged on. The general populace suffered greatly as well. The protracted battle caused the displacement of thousands of people. The LTTE repeatedly declared a cease-fire only to recommence fighting later. Additionally, peace negotiations were held with the assistance of international parties, particularly Norway. Nothing was successful ("The Sri Lankan Civil War").

All the political organisations including, The Tamil Tigers, also known as the LTTE and the JVP, as well as the Sri Lankan government, military, and police, are all frankly described by the author. Additionally, he is not afraid of reflecting on the contributions made by other nations and international organisations that provided assistance and intervention during those years. "Why is the UN here?" (Karunatilaka 199). A politician of Sri Lankan government, Stanley confesses to his son DD, "Dharmendran, I have enough and more on my plate. Have to keep the JVP down and kick the Indians out. Police and Army and STF all coming to me, asking if they can bend the rules. How can you do this?" (Karunatilaka 132).

Interestingly, most of the events are not depicted but they are told through the conversations between the characters. While the country is in the midst of a brutal civil war. Political parties, foreign aid entities, and ethnic communities are at odds with themselves. The whole country is suffering from widespread murders that have occurred on both sides. The titular character, Maali Almeida, has recently passed away and finds himself in a "In Between" world. This first-step purgatory is presumably not the sort of place one would like to get confined in for eternity, so he has seven days to negotiate it to reach "The Light." Maali becomes familiar with the In Between, the area that exists after death. His guide is Sena, a militant young Marxist who was assassinated by the government. Dr. Ranee is the nemesis of Sena who assists the souls towards the light and helps them reincarnate. Maali when thinking of the helper realises, "It is only then you recognise her. Her toothpaste ad

smile had been all over the newspapers for much of 1989. The university lecturer slain by Tamil extremists for the crime of being a Tamil moderate" (Karunatilaka 6).

The ghost narrator in Karunatilaka's work narrates his tale with deftness and vivacity, using sardonic humour and ominous details of the 1980s Tamil massacre in Sri Lanka. Maali's journey to the light and the history of Sri Lanka are interwoven together and the novel unfolds the mysterious death of Maali while also familiarising the reader with the historical period of the Sri Lankan civil war. The book specifically addresses the horrifying atrocities committed during the Tamil pogrom in July 1983, when hundreds of Tamil citizens were brutally murdered and set ablaze in their homes and on the streets during a clash between the government, military, Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), and Marxist radicals. Maali had photographs of all the atrocities that could bring the government down. "1983 was an atrocity. Eight thousand homes, five thousand shops, a hundred fifty thousand homeless, no official body count. The Sri Lankan government has neither acknowledged nor apologised for it. Your photos will help change that. Tell me kolla. Which side are you on?" (Karunatilaka 107).

Because Maali pursued a profession in photojournalism as a young man. He mostly covers the wars, bloodshed, and political crimes that characterise modern life in Sri Lanka in the 1980s through his work as a conflict photojournalist. "Did you take photos of 1983?" (Karunatilaka 7). He works for several news organisations, including the Associated Press, the army, and others. At the time, the country's civil war had been going on for six years, and Maali had documented every horrific element of it, including the atrocities committed by the government and the LTTE, the role played by the Indian army, the ineffectiveness and corruption of the international media, among other things. He must rely on the middlemen and fixers of the afterlife to get access to the world he has left behind in pursuit of answers because there are many people who would want him dead. While talking to Dr. Ranee Maali mentions, "'I know you. You are Dr. Ranee Sridharan. Couldn't make you out without your loudspeaker. Your articles on the Tamil Tigers were superb. But you used my photos without asking'" (Karunatilaka 6).

During the conflict, Maali works in a dangerous setting knowing his life is in danger. There have been several arrests and fatalities of journalists and

activists. "The government could set you up as a traitor; the LTTE, as a spy" (Karunatilaka 296). As a result, any journalist attempting to discredit the government risks losing his life. Despite being aware of the risks, Maali is driven by a desire to make a difference in the world. Maali ends up away in circumstances akin to those that befell activists and reporters who attempted to paint the government in an unfavourable light. "I need to warn my friends. Whoever killed me will steal my photos. I need to watch and see who does" (Karunatilaka 91).

In Maali's photograph, the government minister stands for the harshness of the state towards its citizens. A minister in the government stands and watches while individuals are killed and their homes are set on fire. The minister is delighted because he believes that those who are dying are opposed to the administration. The minister should thus be acting in the opposite direction so that lives might be saved. Maali has documented photos against the Minister of Justice and several other shady people. As stated by Maali,

You have photos of the government Minister who looked on while the savage of '83 torched Tamil homes and slaughtered the occupants. You have portraits of disappeared journalists and vanished activists, bound and gagged and dead in custody. You have grainy yet identifiable snaps of an army major, a Tiger colonel, and a British arms dealer at the same table, sharing a jug of king coconut (Karunatilaka 12).

In contrast to the misguided, sterilised term "riots," which the Sinhalese attempt to portray as if the Tamil victims of 1983 also protested like the Sinhalese, Maali has seven moons to retrieve his two photographs from the 1983 slaughter and atrocity, as Karunatilaka describes it. The two images show Cyril Wijeratne, the minister of justice, standing by as his goons burn Tamils. Despite the fact that Wijeratne is avoiding the camera, Almeida's camera on his Benz automobile window captures Wijeratne's reflection. The main plot of the novel consists of Wijeratne's attempts to locate the images with the aid of Detective Cassim and Major Rajah Udugampola. Also, as the minister, "the Right Contemptible Cyril Wijeratne, stalwart of the government, credited with corrupting the judiciary, setting up the death squads and igniting the pogroms of 1983" (Karunatilaka 129).

If in death the forces of darkness and light compete for Mali's attention, in the real world there are

forces like the Sri Lankan military, the Tamil Tigers who seek a separatist state, the JVP who are interested in overthrowing the capitalist state, the Special Task Force who carry out terrible acts on behalf of the government and hire "garbage men" to destroy the evidence, "peacekeepers" from India who will raze villages to maintain said "peace," the UN, the CIA, random Maali is now able to see both realms in purgatory, but he can only engage in one of them. He concludes that they are not all that dissimilar.

The city scenes also skewer Colombo's aristocracy. Compared to most people, Maali has witnessed much too much violence in his privileged "Colombo bubble." Flashbacks offer a taste of the life Maali led, which included frequent trips to Colombo to take pictures for anyone who would pay him, regardless of their political allegiance: the Sri Lankan Army, the British Embassy, or a Tamil nongovernmental organisation. Maali remembers seeing the Vanni, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, as well as other places where bloodshed and bombardment took place; upon his return to Colombo, the cognitive dissonance seemed to be insurmountable.

The afterlife is full of conflict and regret between the In Between and Maali's perspective of Colombo. "The In Between is congested. It is polluting minds Down There. Too many ghouls are running around whispering bad thoughts into the wrong ears" (Karunatilaka 90). It turns out that there are many other people who are interested in the pictures in addition to Maali. Those who love Maali battle to guarantee that the photographs are utilised for justice as persons involved in the violence in certain shots contend with individuals who commissioned pictures for propaganda. "We have funding and a legal team. And we're going after the murderers of 1983." (Karunatilaka 106). Granting that Maali's friends finally made his pictures public, by the end of his stay in the In Between, Maali had lost interest in them. He understands that his work did not give his life meaning. His life was made lovely and meaningful by the friendship and love he had for Jaki and DD.

Conclusion

As most non-Indian South Asian stories are usually mistaken for Indian literature by readers and publishers, or they are not South Asian enough since they deviate from the typical plot. The different South Asian countries are often labelled as Indian and therefore, imparting them a lack of a unique identity in the West, where the nations are seen as having an Indian identity. Shehan

Karunatilaka, a Sri Lankan author, was effective in bringing out the Sri Lankan perspective. In addition, he can provide information regarding Sri Lanka's complexity without expressing any robust views on politics.

Since its inception in the 1980s, the movement known as New Historicism has served as a potent source of criticism that has influenced both critics and historians. This new perspective on literature and history ventured not only the idea that every individual lives his or her historicity and leading to ideology with codes ingrained in society at large but also the notion that it is impossible to approach a past culture objectively because the critic, similar to the writer, is historically linked and cannot do so. Text is simultaneously an agent that serves to transform society and, at the same time, an ensemble product that captures the desires and wants of a society. In order to grasp the social energy and unravel the ideology of a particular culture, books might therefore be appraised rather than for the purpose of achieving an objective recreation of the past.

Therefore, this paper presents a New Historicism approach to interpreting *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka by analysing the historicity of the text through investigating the author's birth time, family background, educational background, and by analysing the textuality of history through focusing on the historical events described in the novel. Historical events impact the writer's experience, and the experiences of the characters in the novel serve to depict historical events, especially the Sri Lankan civil war. Hence, the individual experiences of the characters are also associated with historical events with one in this way, where we see the journey of Maali Almeida to "the Light" simultaneously expound Sri Lankan history and civil war in the 1990s.

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