



Buddhist Perspective in *The Seven Moons of Mali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka

Dr Anand Sagar(Assistant Professor)

Department of English, Bareilly College Bareilly.

Abstract

The paper aims to discuss the implications of the Buddhist perspective in relation to the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka and, more broadly, the country's beginnings in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022). The transition from an ecocentric view of the unity of all beings to an individualized focus on tragic events is used to analyze the writer's quest for peace in the afterlife journey. The book, which centres on a gay photographer, has numerous allusions to the famous photographs of Nick Ut ("Napalm Girl") and, more importantly, Lionel Wendt of Sri Lanka. The text, which is inscribed in a reimagined Buddhist/Saivite worldview, blurs the painful perception of the recent past and portrays the interethnic conflict as a part of the general, recurring mechanism of violence that was activated at the beginning of the nation by the mythical primordial queen Kuveni, as described in the *Mahāvamsa*. The goal of the photographer, who attempts to resolve the political dilemma through creative intervention, cannot be fulfilled because of the transhistorical character of violence under Kuveni-Mahakali's auspices. Rather, the novel shifts its focus to a more expansive, ecocentric vision that takes on a queer resonance. Beyond the protagonist's personal relationships, the spectrum of queer relationships broadens to include a close bond with all living things. Simultaneously, the "decloseted" historical vision expands into a tropical eco-queer perspective that encompasses both human and non-human vitality, moving away from the recent genocide. In Buddhism it is the direction of mind that decides the direction of karma. The *Dhammapada* starts with the idea that the mind is forerunner of everything what we think we become.

Keywords: Buddhist/Saivite, Karma, Punishment, Rebirth, Violence, Shehan Karunatilaka,

In Buddhism, rebirth in the cycle of samsara is driven by karma (intentional action), not by divine punishment but rather by natural cause and effect: skilful (good) actions result in pleasant outcomes, while unskilful (bad) actions result in suffering, leading to rebirth in realms ranging from hells to heavens. The ultimate goal is to break free from this cycle through compassion and wisdom in order to reach Nirvana. Instead of a permanent soul, there is a continuity of consciousness that is influenced by previous karmic seeds, much like one candle flame kindling another. Karma, which literally translates as "action" or "deed," describes deliberate physical, verbal, and mental deeds. The karmic quality is determined by the motivation (loyalty, compassion, wisdom versus greed, hatred, and illusion). Like gravity, it is a natural law rather than a divine decree. The conditions of rebirth within the six realms—gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hells—are determined by the karmic "seeds" that are created by actions and ripen in this life or subsequent incarnations. The energy or momentum of previous deeds conditions the current existence; there is no permanent self or soul that transmigrates. Rebirths that are beneficial (human, heavenly) are the result of good karma, while those that are unfavorable (animal, hellish) are the result of bad karma. Buddhist karma is about the inexorable ripening of causes rather than rewarding or punishing. It is not divine vengeance that causes pain (*dukkha*) in the present and future, but rather incompetent acts motivated by

greed, anger, and delusion. Since everything conditioned existence is vulnerable to change, even the celestial regions are transient. The goal is to exhaust karmic structures and completely stop the cycle of rebirth, not to obtain a better rebirth. Developing compassion and knowledge (realizing impermanence and no-self) breaks the cycle of bad karma and results in freedom.

The *Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka explores the trauma and injustice of post-war Sri Lanka using Buddhist ideas like rebirth, karma, and the afterlife (the "In Between"). It depicts the country as a purgatory where ghosts seek truth, justice, and freedom from unending cycles of violence, moving beyond retaliation to ethical healing, and integrates indigenous cosmology with themes of memory, human rights, and collective responsibility for past crimes.

Important Buddhist Aspects & Interpretations: The "In Between" (Purgatory): The novel's setting for ghosts echoes Buddhist notions of intermediate states before rebirth by reflecting Sri Lanka's post-civil war state, which is trapped between life, death, and unresolved trauma. Karma and Rebirth: Maali's quest for truth is motivated by the unpaid karmic debts from the conflict and the ongoing cycle of life (samsara), which are reflected in his travels as a ghost together with other spirits. Merit & Liberation (Nirvana): Maali's unfulfilled quest to expose war crimes and uncover hidden realities is a way of transferring merit to the aathma (soul), assisting both himself and others in their quest for freedom from suffering (samsara). Interconnectedness (Ecocentric Vision): The story moves from personal suffering to an interconnected vision, implying that all living things—humans, nature, and spirits—are a part of the same cycle and must deal with the effects of violence collectively. This is a fundamental Buddhist principle. Truth-Telling & Liberation: Buddhist methods to alleviating suffering through insight rather than fair punishment are in line with Maali's ghostly haunting, which compels the living to face horrors and fosters truth, memory, and ethical liberation..

Buddhist ideas are reimagined in the book to create a distinctive setting where war-related ghosts—soldiers, victims, and politicians—navigate a bureaucratic afterlife in search of explanations and reveal secrets. The spectral story is a powerful metaphor for how a country plagued by conflict must face its history in order to achieve genuine reconciliation, which is both politically and spiritually necessary. The story views the ethnic war as a part of a global, interrelated web of life and destruction, fusing Buddhist ideas with queer and ecological issues. In summary, Karunatilaka crafts a fantasy yet profoundly grounded tale about facing national trauma, obtaining justice, and realizing the unity of all beings in the midst of extreme brutality using well-known Lankan spiritual symbols, especially Buddhist ones.

However, the profoundly ingrained tropical thought systems—such as the legacy of Sri Lankan Buddhism and regional variations of Hinduism-Saivism—provide legitimacy for this worldview. The novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) by Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka will be discussed in this article, with an emphasis on how history is perceived in the tropics and how it gets queered into an ecocentric perspective. The reader is given wisdom that points to the disintegration of all creatures in the flux of existence rather than personal tragedy, responsibility, shame, and retribution, despite the fact that the problem the author deals with—the civil war and massacre in Sri Lanka—is extremely terrible. The queering of the outlook entails the multiplication of interactions with other creatures and extends much beyond the fact that the narrative's protagonist is a photographer who also happens to be gay. An ecocentric view of the unity of life is the result of the queering device. Its examination could enhance the theoretical framework of international queer ecocriticism put out by academics like Bruce Erickson and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2010). Karunatilaka's reference to the Buddhist-Saivite tradition creates a cultural contribution that calls for more in-depth analysis than the conventional approaches developed in the

framework of Western academics. However, according to Ken Gelder (2014), local imagery of the afterlife, the monstrous, and the macabre provides a fresh perspective on postcolonial and global Gothic critique. A unique tropical eco-Gothic approach is made possible by the Buddhist belief in the continuation of all life forms and, consequently, in the existence of animal and even vegetable ghosts.

Near a ghostly world, a slain journalist "awakens" to see his corpse being removed from a contaminated lake near Colombo, where it would be dissected and fed to animals. He has "seven moons," or seven days, to figure out who killed him before he had to pass on to another plane of existence because he has amnesia. The *Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker-winning novel, is a visceral journey into a surreal world of violence, impunity, and deferred and denied justice that traverses some of Sri Lanka's most turbulent periods of recent history. It is woven around the basic framework of a classic whodunit. Maali Almeida, also known as Malinda Albert Kabalana, uses his murder investigation as a metaphor for a nation that is genuinely plagued by the ghosts of thousands of victims who are looking for justice, atonement, and closure. In Sri Lanka, the Sinhala Buddhist practice of almsgiving on the seventh day after death is said to invoke and transfer merit to the deceased person's aathma (soul) in order to facilitate the birth of a better life. This is what the phrase "seven moons" in the title alludes to. But *Seven Moons* transforms this religious-cultural practice's time transit into a profoundly unnerving voyage into a realm where the line separating the world of the living from the world of the dead has blurred. Karunatilaka constructs this universe as a spectral dysfunctional bureaucracy, akin to a department of the Sri Lankan government, in his signature style of sardonic humour. Maali serves as both the narrator and an irreverently amusing observer on Sri Lankan life. The comedy, which is reminiscent of the hundreds of comic memes that went viral on social media at the worst of Sri Lanka's political and economic crisis in 2022, makes the suffering understandable and bearable. Comedy turns into a tool for making sense of a world full of tremendous violence and absurdity.

But even with the humor, which Karunatilaka skillfully employs, the book is a challenging read overall. The relatively recent history *Seven Moon* discusses contributes to the text's unnerving tone. Karunatilaka noted in his victory speech that he did not write about more recent events, such the war's end in 2009, because he thought they were too recent and potentially dangerous from a political standpoint. But for Sri Lankans, the 1987–1989 time frames that is featured in the novel is not too distant. Many middle-aged Sri Lankans now were young during this period, and the nation's current situation and frequent references to the "time of terror," or "beeshanaya," serve as unsettling reminders of this terrible history. This eerie feeling is enhanced by the novel's closeness to "real life," which also poses challenging issues about the politics of representation.

The famous Richard de Soyza, a journalist and human rights advocate who was thought to have been tortured and killed by paramilitary groups associated with the ruling government at the time, is a major inspiration for Maali Almeida. In a similar vein, Dr. Ranee, who manifests as a member of the spectral bureaucracy, is modeled after the LTTE-murdered Tamil human rights advocate Dr. Rajini Thiranagama. Other characters that still linger in the public consciousness include Sena, who was modeled after student activist Daya Pathirana, and Major Raja Udugampola, who was modeled after senior police officer Premadasa Udugampola, who was linked to extrajudicial violence and torture. Both praise and criticism have been expressed for their portrayal in the book, especially in Sri Lanka. Given Richard de Soyza's iconic status and reputation as a devoted campaigner, those who knew him have found it challenging to identify with Maali's character—an expedient fixer and a gay playboy with few observable morals or ideals. Although Maali is clearly not Richard—one could argue that, as a photojournalist, Maali is metonymic of the precarity of journalists in general in Sri Lanka—the novel makes it difficult to avoid drawing comparisons between Maali and the real-life Richard because Malinda Albert Kabalana is the name of a character de Soyza portrayed in the 1983 film *Yuganthaya*.

Though I acknowledge that some of the text's portrayals do readily fit into "western" stereotypes of the postcolonial global south, I think this criticism also overlooks the text's performativity and playfulness. It is somewhat problematic to evaluate *Seven Moons* by a perceived standard of verisimilitude expected of other genres of writing because it is neither social nor political history. Although it makes the tragedy of Sri Lanka's violent pasts evident, the text's humor enables a critical evaluation of these histories that avoids emotional romanticization. The novel accomplishes this, in part, by challenging the dichotomies of victims and offenders and emphasizing what we would refer to as "implication." Victims and offenders share a single place in the purgatory-like world where Maali lives. This results in disturbing situations where the victim-perpetrator dichotomy that underpins the majority of ideas of justice and accountability is undermined. The ghost of a woman who was burned alive during the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, for example, confronts Maali. She recognizes Maali and confronts him, claiming he is similar to the "minister" who "watched" her burn alive. The "minister" is most likely a Sinhala politician who was part in the violence. After that, Maali admits to both the reader and himself that he sold this picture to *Newsweek*, even though the publication never used it. This is an instance of "implication" in the book, where Maali is connected to other people's suffering even though he was never a direct participant in the violence and was himself a victim of it. In my opinion, the novel implies that such an implication is nearly unavoidable in situations with strong ties to violent pasts by bringing the worlds of the living and the dead together, as well as victims and offenders. For example, the majoritarian nature of the state in Sri Lanka has benefited the Sinhala population, and even individuals who have never personally engaged in violence against minorities are implicated in its institutional and structural violence. Karunatilaka's unconventional choice of narrative perspective, the second-person "you," which at one level is suggestive of a spirit's out-of-body experience, also reinforces implication because the text occasionally gives the reader the eerie impression that it is speaking to "you," drawing you into its turbulent world.

Additionally, *Seven Moons* as a whole challenges general norms. Despite being marketed as a classic whodunit with the potential for a big discovery, the tale never quite lives up to the hype. The hunt for an elusive collection of photos, which are crucial to solving Maali's murder and would be politically explosive if discovered, is ongoing throughout the book. However, readers' expectations—such as the justice that the text's numerous victims so fervently seek—are postponed because the novel falls short in this regard. In a crisis-stricken society like Sri Lanka, this narrative denouement—as well as Maali's own flawed anti-heroic character—can be interpreted, in my opinion, as a somewhat cynical rejection of restorative prospects. However, the book does provide Maali a chance at redemption, and some of the victims also receive a sort of vindictive justice. The renowned Sri Lankan literary scholar Qadri Ismail reportedly said that certain stories "abide" by Sri Lanka, while others objectify it (2005). *Seven Moons* adheres to the location and its victims despite being readily criticized for objectifying, exoticizing, and orientalisising a conflict-defined Sri Lanka. It is a literature that deals with place politics and provides a kind of justice and vicarious atonement that Sri Lanka's numerous suffering peoples might not yet have access to. "I hope the day comes when the fantastical events of my fiction are limited to the fictional world," Karunatilaka said in his Booker victory speech. This novel faces a dilemma since the world it portrays is one in which forgiveness and hope are unattainable, and it cannot help to replicate this sensation of disappointment. A greater failure in the social and political potential of many postcolonial cultures in the global south, rather than a failure of the book itself, is what this indicates.

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