

"Echoes of Justice: Human Rights in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*"

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### Abstract

This study examines Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, presenting it as a compelling narrative that intertwines human rights issues with Sri Lanka's socio-political dynamics. By analysing the novel's portrayal of war crimes, systemic injustices, and individual agency, the research demonstrates how fiction can serve as a medium to reflect universal human rights concerns. Through a qualitative approach focusing on textual and thematic analysis, the paper positions the novel within the broader context of global human rights literature, highlighting its unique insights into Sri Lanka's intricate realities. The findings underscore how Karunatilaka's narrative critiques human rights violations while fostering discussions on resilience and justice, bridging artistic expression with ethical considerations. The author transitions from emphasizing individual suffering to advocating an ecocentric perspective that underscores the interconnectedness of all life forms.

**Keywords:** Dehumanization, Human, Literature, Realism, Violence

### Introduction

The relationship between literature and human rights offers rich opportunities to explore the complexities of the human experience. Fiction serves as a powerful medium for shedding light on systemic inequalities, amplifying marginalized voices, and showcasing the resilience of individuals. Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* exemplifies this connection. Against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's political turmoil, the novel delves into themes of violence, corruption, and ethical dilemmas, presenting narratives that resonate with key issues in human rights discussions.

The central protagonist, Maali Almeida, is a war photographer caught in the transitional realm between life and death. Through its spectral viewpoint, the narrative provides insight into the

complexities of war crimes, censorship, and the disintegration of societal values, presenting a stark depiction of human rights abuses. This study seeks to examine how Karunatilaka's use of narrative structure, thematic exploration, and character portrayal enriches the discourse on human rights.

The following depictions present Maali Almeida, a war photographer with affiliations to the Sri Lankan Army, international media outlets, and a Tamil-operated NGO (Hoole).

Because, according to silly old you, the problem was that the folks in Colombo, London, and Delhi didn't know the full extent of the horror. And maybe clever young you could produce the photo that turned policymakers against the war. Do for Lanka's civil war what naked napalm girl did for Vietnam (Karunatilaka, 250).

Shehan Karunatilaka's novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* opens with the protagonist awakening in the "afterlife" (Karunatilaka, 4). The novel portrays the "afterlife" as a disordered bureaucratic system that allows him a week to unravel the mystery of his death and move beyond the liminal "In Between" (Karunatilaka, 13). Maali is not only determined to uncover his murderer but also to retrieve the photographs he took in the war zone. He emphasizes "these are photos that will bring down governments. Photos that could stop wars" (Karunatilaka, 6). He hopes these images will reveal the brutal realities of war and serve as a call for peace, much like the famous "napalm girl's" photograph (Karunatilaka, 250) did during the Vietnam War. In 1972, near the conclusion of the Vietnam War, a striking photograph, later known as "The Napalm Girl," captured global attention. It depicted a nine-year-old South Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack, her body severely burned, her arms spread wide, and her face expressing immense pain. This haunting image became an enduring symbol of war's horrors, intensifying anti-war movements worldwide (Miller, 261). In a similar vein, Karunatilaka employs vivid descriptions and stark imagery in his novel to immerse readers in the harsh realities of abductions, mass executions, torture, and civil unrest that afflicted Sri Lanka in the 1980s. By narrating these events through Maali's perspective, the author conveys a deep-seated intention to shed light on the devastating impact of war on his homeland, fostering global awareness and empathy.

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* intertwines historical reality with fiction to examine the unresolved deaths of Sri Lankans during the turbulent 1980s, a period marked by intense violence. The novel is narrated through the voices of ghosts—victims of ethnic conflict, communist uprisings, and state-backed aggression—offering a chilling portrayal of the aftermath of anti-Tamil riots and mass killings involving both the Sri Lankan army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). These spectral entities carry the visible marks of

their suffering, serving as reminders of the brutality they endured. The narrative also sheds light on the insurgency led by the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which primarily targeted left-wing activists and working-class communities.

Using powerful symbolism—including ghosts, fragmented bodies, and war-torn landscapes—the novel reconstructs Sri Lanka's complex political and cultural turmoil. This technique resonates with the principles of Human Rights Literature (HRL), as discussed by Pramod K. Nayar in *Human Rights and Literature: Writing Rights* (2016). HRL aims to expose hidden acts of violence, such as torture and massacres, that often escape historical records. By bringing the voices of victims into the public sphere, this literary form fosters awareness, converting personal suffering into a shared cultural narrative. According to Nayar, HRL functions as a "cultural apparatus" that enables society to confront human rights violations through open discussion and critical engagement (Nayar, 2014, 16). Through its storytelling and the conversations, it sparks, this literary genre deepens our understanding of human rights struggles and their lasting impact.

Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* stands as a significant work within the realm of human rights literature. By intertwining themes of war crimes, institutional corruption, and personal resilience, the novel profoundly critiques Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape while addressing broader global concerns about justice and perseverance. Its innovative storytelling approach encourages readers to consider the role of truth and artistic expression in confronting human rights abuses. This analysis highlights the vital role of literature in deepening discussions on human rights, illustrating how fiction can shed light on some of the most unsettling aspects of human history.

### **Literature review**

Literature has long served as a powerful tool for advocating human rights. Hunt (2007) emphasises that storytelling plays a crucial role in fostering empathy toward injustices, while Slaughter (2007) highlights its capacity to reveal and challenge structural inequalities. In the South Asian literary landscape, novels like Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* have illuminated social and political turmoil alongside human rights concerns. Karunatilaka's novel aligns with this tradition yet distinguishes itself by incorporating speculative fiction to explore Sri Lanka's historical trauma. As Perera (2021) suggests, speculative elements in postcolonial literature offer a means to reinterpret historical events and rethink justice. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* employs this approach, merging realism with allegory to critique systemic flaws while envisioning alternative possibilities.

Numerous literary works and scholarly critiques have examined Sri Lanka's enduring cycle of violence, frequently attributing it to exclusionary political structures. These analyses adopt various perspectives, including postcolonial instability across social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions (Shaheen, Jajja, & Qamar, 2020, 123–139), the impact of war on women (Karmakar, 2022, 1–12), the complexities of minority identities within the nation-state (Fazal, 2012, 163–176), the conflict between separatist movements and democratic principles (Orentlicher, 2017, 131–135), the interplay of majoritarianism and separatist ideologies (Segura, 2015, 1–10), as well as religious and territorial disputes (Senanayake, 2021, 300–305). However, a notable gap exists in exploring postcolonial literature through the lens of Human Rights (HR). In particular, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* has received limited scholarly attention as a work of Human Rights Literature (HRL). Although academic interest in HR studies is growing, postcolonial literary texts that engage with themes of violence and social injustice remain understudied from this perspective, presenting a significant area for further research.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing textual analysis to examine *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* as a work of Human Rights Literature (HRL). Drawing on the theoretical framework of Human Rights and Literature (HRL) as outlined by Pramod K. Nayar, the research explores how Karunatilaka's novel engages with themes of violence, justice, and state repression. A close reading of the text is conducted to identify key narrative strategies—such as symbolism, allegory, and speculative fiction—that foreground human rights violations within Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape. Additionally, the study contextualises the novel within the broader tradition of postcolonial literature that critiques systemic injustices, using secondary sources on South Asian literature, historical accounts of the Sri Lankan civil war, and human rights discourse to reinforce its findings.

Furthermore, this research incorporates an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating insights from literary studies, postcolonial theory, and human rights scholarship. Comparative analysis is used to position *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* alongside other global literary works addressing human rights violations, examining how fiction can serve as an alternative form of historical testimony. Critical discourse analysis is also applied to investigate how the novel constructs its critique of power structures and socio-political violence. By synthesising literary and human rights studies, this methodology aims to highlight the novel's role in fostering awareness and shaping narratives of justice in both a national and global context.

## Discussion

### War crimes and the enduring legacy of violence

Karunatilaka's novel is firmly rooted in Sri Lanka's history of civil turmoil. Through Maali's retrospective narration, the story unveils the brutalities inflicted during the conflict. A particularly striking moment arises when Maali contemplates his photographs: "These were not just pictures of war; they were indictments of humanity's darkest corners" (Karunatilaka, 125). This statement highlights art's dual function as both a record of events and a form of resistance. The statement accelerates both empathy and anger. The novel's focus on capturing acts of violence resonates with the broader human rights objective of bearing witness. As Maali notes: "A camera does not lie, but it can't capture the silence between gunshots" (Karunatilaka, 198), emphasising both the strengths and constraints of visual documentation in human rights advocacy.

Karunatilaka's novel intricately weaves the theme of dehumanization with concepts of indigeneity, identity, and sexuality. The narrative explores how indigeneity is often exploited to reinforce dehumanizing narratives. Through the characters' dialogues and introspections, the novel critiques how identity and indigeneity are used to justify marginalization. This critique becomes especially apparent in the observations of the "Dead Bodyguard", where the language highlights the widespread nature of dehumanization.

'Ceylon was a beautiful island before it filled up with savages.'

'True. Some countries import their savages. We breed ours.'

'You know there were people here long before the Sinhalese?'

'Kuveeni's people?'

'They weren't considered people. We call them devils and snakes.' (Karunatilaka, 136)

The discussion in the referent text centers on the question "Who were the indigenous Lankans?" (Karunatilaka, 136). This question is crucial for all who inhabit the land, as it relates to historical narratives that have shaped laws benefiting Sinhalese, Buddhist, male, and affluent elites, as revealed in the narrative, "chronicle used to codify laws crafted to suppress all that is not Sinhalese and Buddhist and male and wealthy" (Karunatilaka, 136). The conversation also explores the historical presence of the Tamil minority, acknowledging their ancestral lands and the existence of Tamil kingdoms in the northern regions during medieval and colonial periods.

### Institutionalized oppression and corruption

The novel goes beyond individual acts of violence to critique the systemic corruption that sustains injustice. It exposes how Sri Lanka's government and military structures are

intertwined to stifle dissent. Maali's untimely death, for instance, symbolises a society where those who speak the truth are silenced: "They didn't just kill me; they erased my voice" (Karunatilaka, 276).

Maali's mixed Sinhalese-Tamil heritage may have played a role in his death. Acknowledging the dangers tied to his identity, he appears to emphasise his national identity over his ethnic roots:

'Malinda, your mother is Tamil?'

'Half-Burgher, half-Tamil.'

'And your father?'

'Passed away three years ago. He was Sinhala.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. So what are you?'

'A Sri Lankan.' (Karunatilaka, 232)

This broader critique resonates with postcolonial perspectives on state-sanctioned violence. Karunatilaka contrasts Maali's struggles with wider societal collapse, prompting readers to examine institutional involvement in human rights abuses. Maali is frequently reminded that his Sinhalese surname, inherited from his father, offers him a measure of protection. However, his sexuality may have contributed to his murder. From a young age, he recognises the risks of being gay, especially after his father makes a violent remark: "All poofs should be tied up and raped with knives, you looked down at your slippers and never looked him in the face again." The remark unsettles Maali so deeply that he can no longer meet his father's eyes. (Karunatilaka, 24). The narrative underscores the widespread discourse of exclusion and dehumanization rooted in nationality, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, all of which play a key role in the violation of fundamental rights.

### **Personal agency and moral dilemmas**

Though the novel depicts widespread systemic oppression, it also highlights individual resilience. Maali's journey in the afterlife goes beyond seeking justice for himself; it is a quest to reveal greater truths. His choice to release his photographs after his death despite the risks embodies the lasting impact of truth. "What is the point of truth if it remains buried?" he asks (Karunatilaka, 345). Detective Cassim exhibits discomfort and anxiety while preparing to discard the "garbage," a term used to refer to the deceased (Karunatilaka, 226). Ranchagoda tries to comfort him, saying "No point thinking so much. These are all terrorists and thugs" (Karunatilaka, 226). The deliberate massacre of innocents paints a horrifying picture through these words; "Dead Tourists" (Karunatilaka, 309), "Dead Suicides" (Karunatilaka, 284), a "Dead Priest" (Karunatilaka, 257), a "Dead Bodyguard" (Karunatilaka, 134), a "Dead Doctor"

(Karunatilaka, 87), a “Dead Lawyer” (Karunatilaka, 59), a “Dead Revolutionary” (Karunatilaka, 24), “Dead Atheist” (Karunatilaka, 12), and so on. The narrative weaves together multiple voices to highlight the harrowing imagery of war through the perspective of human rights discourse. Perhaps the most chilling moment comes when “The Dead Atheist” responds to Maali’s question about the whereabouts of his own body, at the “same place the flame goes when you snuff it...The mother and daughter buried under bricks in Kilinochchi, the ten students burned on tyres in Malabe, the planter was tied to a tree with entrails, none of them went anywhere” (Karunatilaka, 12).

Death squads were assigned to suppress dissent, destroy evidence of government-perpetrated war crimes, and punish rebels through torture. A notorious torture cell run by Raja Udugampola exposes the state's concealed and oppressive mechanisms.

In Room One, two men in masks were beating a boy with pipes. In Room Two, a boy was strapped to a bed and shrieking. In Room Three, two boys were hung upside down with bags on their heads. In Room Four, a man in a surgical mask and tinted glasses was leaning over a man in a chair (Karunatilaka, 256).

Maali's ethical struggles reflect real-world challenges in human rights activism, where revealing injustices frequently comes at a personal cost. Karunatilaka’s nuanced depiction of these conflicts adds depth to the narrative’s moral complexity.

## **Results**

An analysis of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* presents a layered depiction of human rights violations in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The novel examines how ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality intersect as central factors in human rights abuses. Through the framework of Human Rights Literature (HRL), it exposes the dehumanization of individuals. The use of spectral voices amplifies the silenced histories of violence and state oppression, while the narrative also interrogates the role of national identity in fostering social exclusion and systemic violations. By portraying violence, torture, and the pursuit of justice, the novel urges readers to critically reflect on the broader implications of human rights abuses. Situating these issues within a cultural discourse, the text cultivates empathy and raises awareness of both historical and ongoing struggles. This study highlights the novel’s function as a tool for human rights advocacy, prompting reflection on the universal nature of human dignity. Ultimately, it demonstrates how the narrative shifts the focus from national identity to a broader human identity, encouraging a more inclusive perspective on human rights.

The study demonstrates that *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* goes beyond conventional human rights literature. By merging speculative fiction with stark realism, the novel crafts a distinctive narrative that challenges systemic oppression while also conveying themes of hope and resilience. Key insights include.

By employing a spectral narrator, the novel offers a layered examination of violence and justice.

Karunatilaka's emphasis on documentation and truth-telling highlights art's significance in human rights advocacy.

The narrative's ethical and moral intricacies reflect real-world struggles in confronting systemic injustices.

### **Conclusion**

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* emerges as a pivotal work in Human Rights Literature (HRL), intertwining ethical principles of rights with cultural discourse to enhance accessibility. The novel transforms depictions of human rights violations and historical events into literary expression, fostering deeper empathy and understanding of complex human rights issues. Embedding legal narratives within fiction creates a platform for dialogue on pressing political and social conflicts. Moreover, it reframes discussions of nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality through the lens of fundamental rights, stressing the importance of universal human dignity and protection. The question of "Who is a Sri Lankan?" expands into the broader inquiry of "Who is human?" Through its call for the recognition of all individuals as human, regardless of identity, the novel makes a profound and meaningful contribution to both human rights discourse and literature.

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