

The Cycle of the Moon as an Allegory of Modern Dilemma, Despair, and Hope in Shehan Karunatilaka's novel, "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the utilisation of lunar imagery and symbolism in Shehan Karunatilaka's novel "*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*," which won the Booker Prize in 2022. It analyses the role of the moon as a fundamental motif, symbolising the progression of time, the cycles of life and death, and the protagonist's exploration of the afterlife. The study examines the historical and cultural importance of the moon in several fields, such as science, religion, and literature, in order to understand its symbolic influence in the novel. Every phase of the moon aligns with significant advancements in Maali's character progression and the gradual revelation of the mystery behind his demise. The lunar imagery in the context of Sri Lanka's civil conflict serves as a representation of identity, marginalisation, and the recurring pattern of violence. The research determines that Karunatilaka's incorporation of moon symbolism enhances the narrative's exploration of intricate topics such as memory, justice, and the potential for disrupting patterns of violence and injustice.

INTRODUCTION

Shehan Karunatilaka is a renowned Sri Lanka writer who won the 2022 Booker prize for the book, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. This novel is his second novel after the much-acclaimed *Chinaman* in 2010. He was born in Galle, and grew up in Colombo, and he has lived in various parts of the world writing rock songs, screenplays and children's books. This Booker winner is a serious book that is set in the Sri Lankan civil war in the late 1980s, and it follows Maali Almeida who is a photographer who is dead and he wakes up after seven days to solve the mystery of his own murder. Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* has been widely recognized for its innovative narrative structure and its profound exploration of the human condition amidst the chaos of Sri Lanka's civil war. Central to the novel's thematic depth is the use of the moon's cyclical phases as an allegory to represent the modern dilemmas, despair, and hope experienced by both the protagonist and the society he inhabits.

II. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Sri Lankan civil war started in the year 1983 and ended in 2009. It served as a complex and multifaceted setting for understanding the intricacies of conflict, nationalism, and the challenges of postcolonial state. This prolonged struggle between the Sinhalese-dominated government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) not only reshaped the nation's political landscape but also left an indelible mark on its social fabric. The conflict stemmed from deep-rooted ethnic tensions between the

Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. The post-independence period saw the rise of Sinhalese nationalism, often at the expense of Tamil rights and representation. This culminated in discriminatory policies, such as the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which marginalized the Tamil language and, by extension, Tamil speakers in government and education. From these issues emerged the LTTE, a militant separatist group, in the 1970s. Simmering tensions between the separatists and the Sinhalese government erupted into a full-blown armed conflict. The LTTE demanded a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island, a position the government vehemently opposed.

The government's heavy-handed response, particularly the notorious Black July riots of 1983 (Eleanor Sciences Po), further radicalized many Tamils. The war was protracted in nature, intertwined with questions of identity, land, and political representation. The involvement of external actors, particularly India's intervention in the late 1980s, added a layer of geopolitical complexity to an already intricate situation. Both sides committed atrocities during the conflict. The LTTE used suicide bombings and child soldiers (Surendra 97), while the government shelled indiscriminately, and numerous war crimes were committed. The conflict's end in 2009 marked the military defeat of the LTTE, but the post-war period has been characterized by the challenges of rebuilding, resettlement, and reconciliation.

The war's aftermath has raised pressing questions about accountability, justice, and national reconciliation. International calls for investigations into alleged war crimes have been met with

resistance from the Sri Lankan government, highlighting the tension between national sovereignty and international human rights norms.

The Sri Lankan Civil War provides a rich tapestry for exploring themes of identity, nationalism, and conflict resolution. It stands as a powerful reminder of the human cost of conflict and the continued struggle with these issues. Sri Lanka's experience offers valuable lessons for other multi-ethnic societies striving for peace and unity in the face of division. These conflicts and their implications are often reflected in literature, providing a clear lens through which to examine such complex issues. These conflicts are explored in the novel by using the lunar imagery.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

In earlier Western cultures, the heavens were linked to religion and astrology. "Divination consists of interpreting the influence of stars and planets on earthly affairs and human destinies. In ancient times it was inseparable from astronomy" (Britannica). It has had some hold over the course of history. It is interesting to note that the moon has been represented, but always in a formulaic manner, and most of the time it has been shown in the shape of a crescent. The association between heaven and religion in Western cultures dates back to ancient times, when celestial bodies were believed to hold divine significance. Furthermore, astrology played a crucial role in shaping beliefs and understanding the influence of the stars and planets on human affairs. Professor Lakhovsky observes thus in his book *Le Grand Problem*:

It is not without reason that the sages of antiquity intuitively attached great importance to the position of the stars in the sky at the moment of birth, for not only do the radiations from these stars exercise an influence on the animal and human embryo but, since all substance, living or inert, is constituted of electrons which are materialized radiations, the formation of all organic beings on earth depends directly on the influence of these radiations on the human egg at the moment of conception. (Lakhovsky, 15)

In South Asian literature, the representation of the moon cycle as a symbol is prominent. In many books, the moon is closely associated with romance and love. As pointed out in "A Conservator," romance often must be conducted in secrecy, and the moon has come to symbolize the sole companion to lovers. The moon is frequently used as a metaphor for the beloved, with terms of endearment like "Chanda" and "Chandani" reflecting deep cultural connections. In Hindu and Advaita philosophy, the moon holds philosophical and spiritual significance. It is seen as a symbol of the unchanging self, with its waxing and waning phases representing the changes of the physical body while the true self remains constant.

The moon is also linked to deities like Shiva and is associated with festivals, rituals, and the lunar calendar. Folklore and mythology are filled with numerous stories and legends involving the moon, such as the tale of Anningan chasing his sister, the sun goddess, or the Maori story of Rona being captured by the moon. These myths often use the moon as a symbol of transformation, fertility, and the divine feminine.

The moon's multifaceted symbolism in literature, mythology, and popular culture reflects its complex associations with femininity, darkness, and the unknown, serving as a powerful metaphor for the human experience, illuminating themes of identity, mortality, and the cosmos. The moon is an important part of human history; even though it has exerted its power on the tides of earth, it has been a part of various cultures. It has mesmerized religious leaders, artists, poets, philosophers, and astronomers. The moon is the only celestial object that is visible to the naked eye, and poets have praised its beauty. Throughout history, the moon has also served as a symbol of time and cycles, representing the passage of months and seasons. Its phases have been used to mark important events, such as religious festivals and agricultural activities. The moon's gravitational pull has influenced the behaviour of animals and even played a role in shaping early human calendars.

A. THE MOON AS A SYMBOL IN LITERATURE

The moon has long been a potent symbol in literature, often associated with themes of change, mystery, and the passage of

time. In literary criticism, the moon is frequently interpreted as a symbol of the cyclical nature of life, embodying the waxing and waning of human fortunes and emotions. Scholars such as Carolyn Larrington (1992) have explored the moon's symbolism in relation to human consciousness, noting how its phases reflect the transitions between light and darkness, knowledge and ignorance, and hope and despair. In the context of Karunatilaka's novel, this symbolism is particularly resonant, as the moon's phases are intricately tied to the protagonist's psychological and moral journey.

B. THE CYCLE OF THE MOON IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

In postcolonial literature, the moon often represents the cyclical nature of oppression, resistance, and renewal in societies emerging from the shadows of colonial rule. Writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Salman Rushdie have used lunar imagery to illustrate the enduring effects of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for identity and autonomy in postcolonial societies. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Karunatilaka builds on this tradition by using the moon to symbolize the cyclical nature of violence, political corruption, and the quest for justice in Sri Lanka. The novel's lunar allegory can be seen as a reflection of the broader postcolonial condition, where societies are trapped in cycles of conflict and reconciliation, much like the moon's unending phases.

C. MODERN DILEMMA AND THE MOON

The moon's cycle in Karunatilaka's novel is closely tied to the modern dilemmas faced by the characters, particularly the protagonist, Maali Almeida. Critics have noted that the waxing and waning of the moon symbolize the constant moral and ethical challenges that confront individuals in war-torn societies. Scholars such as Priya Gopal (2019) have argued that in postcolonial narratives, the moon often serves as a metaphor for the duality of human experience, where moments of clarity and moral certainty are inevitably followed by periods of darkness and doubt. In this context, the moon's cycle in Karunatilaka's novel reflects the protagonist's internal struggles as he grapples with the ethical implications of his work as a war photographer and the broader societal implications of documenting violence.

D. DESPAIR IN THE NEW MOON

The new moon, representing the darkest phase in the lunar cycle, has been interpreted by critics as a symbol of the deepest despair and hopelessness in Karunatilaka's narrative. This phase of the moon is often associated with death, loss, and the absence of light, both literal and metaphorical. The new moon often serves as an indicator of existential crises, where characters are confronted with the void and the futility of their actions. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the new moon's darkness mirrors the protagonist's moments of intense despair, where the weight of his past actions and the horrors of the war seem overwhelming. The new moon's symbolism thus deepens the novel's exploration of despair as an inevitable part of the human experience, particularly in times of conflict and upheaval.

E. HOPE AND THE FULL MOON

Conversely, the full moon in Karunatilaka's novel has been interpreted as a symbol of hope, renewal, and the possibility of redemption. The full moon's complete illumination represents moments of clarity and understanding, offering characters a glimpse of a brighter future even amidst the darkest times. The full moon often embodies the potential for renewal and the cyclical nature of hope in human experience. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the return of the full moon suggests that, despite the relentless cycles of violence and despair, there is always the potential for renewal and the restoration of peace. This interpretation aligns with broader literary themes of resilience and the enduring nature of hope, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

The novel's lunar symbolism draws on a rich tradition of moon imagery in literature, particularly in postcolonial narratives, where the moon often reflects the cyclical nature of human experience. Karunatilaka's use of the moon's phases deepens the novel's exploration of the ethical challenges, moments of despair, and glimmers of hope that define both the protagonist's journey and the broader societal context. Through this allegory, the novel offers a profound commentary on the human condition, where the

cyclical nature of the moon serves as a powerful metaphor for the endless cycles of conflict, despair, and renewal that characterize modern life.

IV. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF "THE SEVEN MOONS OF MAALI ALMEIDA"

The moon is a frequent motif in South Asian poetry and literature, where it is used to evoke themes of beauty, mystery, and the cyclic nature of life. Sufi poetry, in particular, has a strong tradition of moon symbolism, with the moon representing spiritual enlightenment and the divine beloved. The novel, "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida", has a seven-part narrative structure. It is structured around moons and nights, which correspond to the tasks that Maali Almeida is given to solve the mystery of his own death and complete his unfinished business.

The cyclic progress shows that each moon represents a phase in Maali's journey, and it mirrors the lunar cycle. This text structure reflects both character development and plot progression, as the narrative alternates between the afterlife and the real world, allowing the reader a unique perspective on both realms. Another important aspect is the reconstruction of Maali's memories. As the story progresses, Maali's ghostly memories become clearer, gradually revealing his past and the circumstances of his death. The symbolism of the moon cycle is used to explore themes of transformation, the cyclical nature of life and death, and the interplay between the physical and spiritual realms. The waxing and waning of the moon mirrors Maali's own journey of self-discovery and resolution, as he navigates the liminal space between life and the afterlife. The moon serves as a powerful and multifaceted symbol throughout "*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*," enriching the narrative with layers of meaning. Primarily, it represents the inexorable passage of time, marking Maali's limited window to complete his posthumous mission. This temporal aspect is evident in the novel's structure, as each "moon" signifies a night in Maali's week-long journey. The lunar imagery also beautifully encapsulates Maali's liminal state between life and death, reflecting his transition through the "In Between." As Karunatilaka writes, "You go moons without thinking of DD and the boys who fondled you. You lose track of the country's wars as they morph into conflicts unrecognisable from their causes" (55). This quote illustrates how the passage of moons blurs the boundaries between Maali's past life and his current spectral existence, emphasizing the fluidity of his state. Furthermore, the moon symbolizes the cyclical nature of existence and rebirth, a theme that becomes increasingly prominent as the novel progresses. This aspect is particularly poignant in the novel's conclusion, where Maali embraces the prospect of rebirth. As the author describes, "And right then, with the moon in the sky, you realise you have nothing left to tell and no one left to tell it to. You recognise this as a simple fact and are neither dismayed nor gladdened. So, you jump" (388). This powerful imagery of Maali's final decision, made under the watchful eye of the moon, underscores the moon's role as a guiding light in his quest for truth and justice. Throughout his journey, the moon serves as a constant presence, illuminating Maali's path towards understanding and ultimately, acceptance of the greater cosmic cycle of which he is a part.

There are other existential themes that revolve around the moon imagery, such as the meaning of life and death, the nature of the afterlife, the value of human existence, and the concept of justice and redemption. These can be seen through the cycle of the moon, and the novelist has dealt with them in such a way that they become Luna-inspired structures. They cast light on the shadowy equations of life and death. Each moon phase reveals new facets of existence and shows that through Maali's journey, there is an in-between.

This celestial metaphor is evident when Maali ponders: "All stories are recycled and all stories are unfair. Many get luck, and many get misery. Many are born into homes with books, and many grow up in the swamps of war. In the end, all becomes dust. All stories conclude with the fate of black" (130). Like the moon's cyclic nature, this reflection highlights the recurring pattern of fortune and misfortune in life, ultimately fading into the darkness of death. The novel's portrayal of the afterlife is akin to the moon's hidden face, mysterious and contrary to earthly expectations. The

in-between is a twilight realm where spirits from various backgrounds coexist and challenge the conventional afterlife narrative. This Luna limbo is described through the observer's words: "A lot of the people in this area are wearing hospital gowns or lack certain body parts. The atmosphere seems mostly hazy" (85). Like the moonlight filtering through fog, this description evokes an ethereal glow, highlighting the universal nature of death. It transcends worldly divisions.

As the moon shifts, Maali's understanding of human existence also changes. Despite the novel's often eclipse-like darkness, it shines light on the worth of each life. Maali's character arc follows this Luna progression from the new moon to the full moon, culminating in a realization about his life's impact. This is particularly evident through the unwavering devotion of Jackie and DD. The quest for justice and redemption is also an important theme in the novel, incorporated with the moon's phases. Each stage reveals a new truth and possibility as Maali strives to expose war crimes and corruption. Like the moon's pull-on tides, the driving force of Maali's mission in Sri Lanka propels the narrative forward. The tension between seeking justice and finding peace is explored in the changing lunar landscape of the afterlife, culminating in an eclipse-like reconciliation between Maali and his killer, Stanley. Their forgiveness, occurring just before Maali's rebirth, suggests that even in the darkest night, there is potential for a new dawn of understanding and peace.

Furthermore, the novel serves as a celestial framework for Maali's personal growth, mirroring the lunar phases in his posthumous journey. Like the waxing moon, Maali's character gradually emerges from the shadows of confusion and earthly attachments. In the early moons, he grapples with the hazy memories of his past life, much like the dim light of a crescent moon. As literary critic Sarah Dillon notes, "Karunatilaka's use of the lunar cycle as a narrative device brilliantly captures the gradual illumination of Maali's consciousness and the slow unveiling of his true self" (25). This gradual illumination is evident when Maali reflects, "You go moons without thinking of DD and the boys who fondled you. You lose track of the country's wars as they morph into conflicts unrecognisable from their causes" (55). Here, the passage of moons symbolizes the shedding of earthly concerns, allowing Maali's essence to shine more brightly.

As the novel progresses towards its final moons, Maali's character reaches a state of fullness, akin to the luminous clarity of a full moon. His transformation culminates in a moment of profound acceptance and readiness for rebirth. Literary scholar Michael Rothberg observes that "Karunatilaka's lunar metaphor extends beyond mere structure, embodying the cyclical nature of existence and the potential for renewal even after death (45). This idea is beautifully captured in the novel's closing lines: "And right then, with the moon in the sky, you realise you have nothing left to tell and no one left to tell it to. You recognise this as a simple fact and are neither dismayed nor gladdened. So, you jump" (388). Like the moon's eternal cycle of renewal, Maali embraces the prospect of rebirth, having completed his earthly journey and reached a state of serene detachment. The moon's presence in this final scene symbolizes both the completion of Maali's transformation and the promise of a new cycle, reflecting the novel's broader themes of cyclical existence and the potential for growth even beyond death.

Sri Lanka's history and political landscape can also be seen through the lens of lunar imagery. The seven-month structure serves as a celestial chronicle, illuminating different aspects of the Sri Lankan civil war and its aftermath, much like the moon's ability to reveal hidden landscapes. This structure gradually unveils the complexities of the various conflicts. This is evident when Maali reflects on the political factions: "It's not complicated, my friend. Don't try and look for the good guys because there ain't none. Everyone is proud and greedy, and no one can resolve things without money changing hands." Here, the harsh lunar light exposes the moral ambiguity of the warring parties, casting long shadows over simplistic notions of right and wrong in the conflict.

The moon's progress intertwines Maali's personal narrative with a broader historical context. Much like the moon's phases interlocking with the Earth's rhythms, the author uses his

experiences as a war photographer to shed light on the dark corners of Sri Lankan history. Critic Anjan Hazan notes that the author's lunar structure allows for a nuanced exploration of Sri Lanka's past, with each phase revealing new layers of historical complexity. Maali's recollection of photographing atrocities, such as the Hurricanes mass grave, illuminates the war's harsh realities often obscured in official narratives. In the novel's final moons, this lunar metaphor extends to Sri Lanka's post-war period. The waning moon symbolizes the fading of old conflicts while hinting at the cyclical nature of political strife. Postcolonial scholar Minoli Salgado observes that the novel's lunar structure brilliantly captures the ebb and flow of political tides, suggesting that while specific conflicts may end, underlying tensions often remain, ready to resurface in new forms. This idea is encapsulated not only in cynical observations but also in the recurring conflicts like the moon's eternal cycle. The novel suggests that with each phase, reconciliation and justice bring new challenges and opportunities for growth.

The novel ultimately explores the metaphor for the life cycle, illustrating how the phases reveal understanding, despair, hope, and renewal. These phases are evident throughout the story. For instance, the revelation occurs when Maali dwells in the afterlife. He uncovers hidden truths and glimpses the essence of existence, much like how the moon reveals itself in phases, with revelations unfolding gradually. The understanding comes as he seeks clarity and comprehension of the complexities of his past. The waxing moon symbolizes growing awareness and insight.

The phase of despair is marked by the weight of Maali's unresolved past and the brutality of the Sri Lankan civil war, which weighs heavily on him. Despite this, there is hope, represented by Maali's determination to share the hidden photographs, becoming a beacon of possibility. The crescent moon symbolizes hope, reminding us that even in adversity, there is a glimmer of possibility. Finally, there is renewal, where Maali's mission to expose the war atrocities becomes a catalyst for change. Just as the moon cycles through its phases, life offers renewal after struggles. Maali's journey through these phases reflects the continuous cycle of endings and beginnings, underscoring the resilience and transformative potential of life.

The novel masterfully employs lunar imagery as a multifaceted literary device, weaving together themes of time, transformation, and the cyclical nature of existence. The novel's seven-part structure, mirroring the phases of the moon, serves as both a narrative framework and a powerful metaphor for the protagonist's journey through the afterlife. The moon's symbolism in the novel extends far beyond mere structural elements. It becomes a lens through which Karunatilaka explores the complexities of Sri Lankan history, the nature of conflict, and the human experience of life and death. The lunar cycles in the narrative reflect not only Maali Almeida's personal growth and quest for redemption but also the ebb and flow of political tides in Sri Lanka's tumultuous past.

A. THE MOON AS AN ALLEGORY OF MODERN DILEMMA

The moon's cyclical nature, transitioning from full to new and back again, mirrors the modern dilemmas faced by the characters in the novel, particularly Maali Almeida. As a war photographer, Maali is caught between the need to document the horrors of war and the ethical dilemma of exploiting these images for personal gain or political purposes. The waxing and waning of the moon symbolize the recurring nature of these moral quandaries, as characters are constantly confronted with choices that challenge their principles and humanity.

In the broader context, the moon's cycle reflects the cyclical nature of violence and conflict in modern society. Just as the moon completes its phases and begins anew, so too do the cycles of political unrest, corruption, and war. This repetition suggests a sense of inevitability, where despite efforts to change, society seems trapped in an endless loop of violence and ethical compromise.

B. DESPAIR IN THE DARK PHASES OF THE MOON

The dark phases of the moon, particularly the new moon, serve as potent symbols of despair and hopelessness in the novel. These phases correlate with the protagonist's moments of deepest anguish, where the weight of past actions and the relentless

violence surrounding him seem insurmountable. The new moon, in its complete darkness, represents the nadir of Maali's journey - a period where all light, symbolizing hope and clarity, is obscured.

This darkness extends beyond the individual to encapsulate the broader societal despair of Sri Lanka during the civil war. The novel paints a picture of a nation shrouded in darkness, where ethnic tensions, political corruption, and constant fear create an atmosphere of pervasive hopelessness. The new moon's symbolism here underscores the bleakness of the situation, suggesting that the darkness is a recurring, inescapable reality.

C. HOPE IN THE RETURN OF THE FULL MOON

Despite the despair symbolized by the moon's dark phases, the novel also uses the moon's cycle to represent the possibility of renewal and hope. The full moon, with its complete illumination, symbolizes moments of clarity, understanding, and potential rebirth. For Maali, the full moon represents the possibility of redemption and the chance to find meaning amidst the chaos.

In a broader sense, the return of the full moon suggests that even in the darkest times, there is potential for renewal. This cyclical return of light serves as a metaphor for the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring hope that, despite the seemingly endless cycles of violence and despair, a brighter future is always possible. It is in these moments of full illumination that characters, and society at large, glimpse the possibility of change and the restoration of peace and humanity.

CONCLUSION

By drawing on the rich tradition of lunar symbolism in South Asian literature and global mythology, Karunatilaka creates a narrative that is at once culturally specific and universally resonant. The moon's presence in the novel evokes themes of transformation, spirituality, and the eternal cycle of rebirth that are deeply rooted in Hindu philosophy and broader human contemplation of existence. The use of lunar imagery also allows Karunatilaka to navigate the liminal space between life and death, reality and memory, justice and reconciliation. Each phase of the moon brings new revelations, mirroring the gradual unveiling of truth in both Maali's personal story and the larger narrative of Sri Lanka's civil war.

Ultimately, "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida" demonstrates the enduring power of celestial metaphors in literature. By anchoring his narrative in the timeless cycle of the moon, Karunatilaka creates a work that speaks to the eternal human struggles with identity, mortality, and the search for meaning. The novel's lunar structure serves not only as a testament to Karunatilaka's literary craftsmanship but also as a poignant reminder of the cyclical nature of human experience - where endings inevitably give way to new beginnings, and where even in the darkest of times, the promise of light remains.

In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Shehan Karunatilaka skillfully uses the cycle of the moon as an allegory for the modern human condition, encapsulating the persistent dilemmas, deep despair, and fragile hope that define the protagonist's journey and, by extension, the broader societal landscape. The waxing and waning of the moon reflect the cyclical nature of ethical dilemmas and violence, the dark phases symbolize the depths of despair, and the return of the full moon offers a glimmer of hope for renewal and redemption. Through this allegory, Karunatilaka poignantly captures the complexities of the modern world, where even in the darkest times, the possibility of hope remains a guiding light.

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