



Queer Identities in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Karunatilaka (2022) and *The Song of Achilles* by Miller (2011): A Comparative Analysis from a South Asian Perspective

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Abstract

This research study attempts to present a comparative analysis of the queer identities portrayed in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka (2022) and *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller (2011) from a South Asian perspective to examine how cultural, historical, and socio-political aspects of their geographical settings influence such identities in both novels and to identify the narrative techniques and characterizations used in them to portray their queer relationships. Moreover, the central questions that guide this study are: 1) how queer do the identities depicted through their main characters appear to be; and 2) and what similarities and differences emerge in the portrayal of their queer relationships. In order to achieve these objectives a qualitative research approach is adopted where the data is collected by subjecting the respective novels to a thorough critical reading and extracting the relevant evidence from their narrative using critical discourse analysis. The data is analyzed using techniques developed from queer theory, semiotics, and critical discourse analysis. Finally, this research attempts to reveal from a South Asian perspective the author's expectation for the queer identities portrayed in the two relevant while illuminating on the fact they appeal for inclusive society.

Keywords: Queer identities; South Asian Perspective; Comparative analysis; Inclusivity; Representation

Introduction

The 'Queer' identities are popular in contemporary novels.

"Queer is used as an umbrella term for sexual minorities. It was used to show the negativity and a social discomfort towards those who have sexual relationships with the same gender." (Queer Theory in Literature, 2024) Furthermore, "queer literature is literature that involves queer identities and relationships breaking the heteronormative outlook" (Roy, 2023). "The last 25 years have seen a number of important developments regarding sexual and gender identities, and the socio-political context that shapes them" (Richards, et al., 2016).

However, when it comes to South Asia, it is visible that the queer identities are stigmatized.

"In mainstream societies across South Asia, queer individuals are marginalized and face stigma, persecution, threats, and sexual violence. Although the queer identities face much complexities in South Asia, the Queer literature in South Asia is a testament to the resilience, creativity, and diversity of LGBTQ+ communities across the region (Bhargava, 2024).

This study analyses how "*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*" embodies South Asian perspective on queer identities, drawing parallels and contrasts with "*The Song of Achilles*."

As Bates, Chin and Becker (2022) states, "sex, gen-

der identity, and sexual orientations are core to an individual's understanding of who they are, and these characteristics shape each person's experiences, relationships, and opportunities throughout their lives. An individual's gender identity may not be the same as their sex and may lie outside the binary of male/female".

These novels vividly capture the traditional and counter-heteronormative paradigms of identity, gender, societal norms and love which shows the idea of queer identities. Also, this study shows how 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida' embodies South Asian perspectives on queer identities, and how do these portrayals draw parallels and contrasts with those in 'The Song of Achilles' and illuminates diversity. According to Ricee (2022) "Inclusivity means making sure everyone feels welcome, valued, and respected, no matter who they are or where they come from."

Academically, this research provides an in-depth analysis of two significant novels on queer theory.

According to the Oxford references (2024), "queer theory is a critical discourse developed in the 1990s in order to deconstruct (or 'to queer') sexuality and gender in the wake of gay identity politics, which had tended to rely on strategic essentialism. Opposed to gender essentialism, queer theorists see sexuality as a discursive social construction, fluid, plural, and continually negotiated rather than a natural, fixed, core identity."

Furthermore, this research shows how queer identities and narrations are shown in world literature through different cultural and historical contexts. Moreover, it combines interdisciplinary insights such as gender studies, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. It provides valuable insights for the scholars in these fields to foster a more holistic approach to future literary analysis.

In practical aspects, this research can serve as promoting inclusivity by highlighting its role in these novels encouraging the literary community to embrace more diverse narratives. Also, this

study highlights the marginalised communities by upbringing their voices which are mostly shattered or silenced by history.

As the American College of Trust and Estate Counsel states (2024), "Marginalised communities experience socio-political, socio-cultural, and socio-economic discrimination and exclusion along with unequal and restricted access to privileges and opportunities."

This study aims to analyze the representation of queer identities in 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida' from a South Asian perspective and to draw parallels and contrasts between the portrayal of queer identities in 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida' and 'The Song of Achilles.' On the contrary, the objectives are to examine how cultural, historical, and social contexts influence the depiction of queer identities in both novels and to identify and compare the narrative techniques and character development used to portray queer relationships in 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida' and 'The Song of Achilles.' Moreover, the central questions that guide this study are: how queer identities depicted through the main characters in 'The Song of Achilles' and 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida'? And also, what similarities and differences can be identified in the portrayal of queer relationships in both novels? By addressing these questions and objectives, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of queer representation, particularly in the South Asian perspective and to highlight the importance of inclusive and diverse narratives in shaping societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities.

'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida' by the Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka, follows the after-life journey of Maali Almeida, where his point of view shows the sexual identities and socio-political turmoil of Sri Lanka. Similarly, Madeline Miller's debut novel, "The Song of Achilles" is a retelling of Homer's Iliad through the view point of Patroclus. The novel sets in the ancient Greece, in the time which the Trojan war took place and it centers around the queer relationship that Achilles

and Patroclus had while showing the socio-cultural and political situations at that time. As mentioned earlier both books show different perspectives in queer identities in their own unique ways.

“Ever since the rise of the LGBTQ+ movement in the 60s and its consequent influence on society’s standards, along with the development of queer and gender studies, some contemporary authors have reconceived the hero in a completely new perspective” (Stofanikova, 2022).

“On the queer discourse in Sri Lanka one meets with a stumbling block - an absence of a substantial corpus of published research on the queer community in Sri Lanka. (Siriwardena, 2017). Furthermore, as Costa (2020) states, “the queer identity is often considered as a taboo in Sri Lanka and also adult consensual same-sex relationships are criminalized under the Sri Lankan Penal Code. However, certain contemporary works of Sri Lankan literature written in English and a few films have managed to provide visibility to these sexual minorities, which are otherwise completely absent from the hegemonic heteronormative discourse.”

“The earliest representation of queer identity in the contemporary Sri Lankan novel written in English can be seen in ‘Giraya’ (1971) by Punyakante Wijenaik and ‘The Call of the Kirala’ (1971) by James Goonewardene. Some significant contemporary works where the queer identity is visible, include novels like Carl Muller’s ‘The Jam Fruit Tree (1993), Shyam Selvadurai’s ‘Funny Boy’ (1994), and Visakesa Chandrasekaram’s ‘Tigers Don’t Confess (2011) (Costa, 2020).”

Moreover, Shehan Karunatilaka’s ‘The Seven Moons of Mali Almeida’ (2022) also provides queer identities through the plot and the narration. Karunatilaka’s ‘The Seven Moons of Mali Almeida’ (2022), and Shyam Selvadurai’s ‘Funny Boy’ (1994) align with each other’s due to their shared themes on war and queer relationships. Shyam Selvadurai’s “Funny Boy” (1994) explores the coming-of-age of Arjie Chelvaratnam, set against the backdrop of escalating political tensions, anti-Tamil riots, and heteronormative societal norms, culminating in his internal conflict over his desire for Shehan

(Selvadurai, 2015).

Similarly, Karunatilaka’s ‘The Seven Moons of Mali Almeida’ (2022) shares the same political background and the cultural issue like in ‘Funny Boy’ on where the society considers the queer identity as a taboo. “Karunatilaka’s dead narrator tells the story about the Tamil genocide committed during the Sri Lankan civil war of the 1980s.

“The novel unravels atrocities of 1983 enraged through the LTE, the government, the Marxist radicals. And also, Karunatilaka weaves a homosexual love story between Maali and DD. While Maali is open about his sexuality, and the novel gives a panoramic and gritty view of the gay subculture of Colombo and rural Sri Lanka (Devi, Asian Review of Books, 2022). “

“In many parts of the world, homosexuality is increasingly accepted and celebrated, with greater visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in popular culture and media. Sri Lanka has not yet accepted and legalised same-sex relationships even after its neighboring country, India decriminalised it in the year 2018. The political viewpoint on this matter is complex and multifaceted that has not reached any conclusion” (Mathew, 2024).

When it comes to ‘The Song of Achilles’, it retells the Iliad from the perspective of Patroclus who was Achilles’ lover. The opening lines of the Iliad gives the key issue for the climax in Iliad.

“Anger-sing, goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus” (Homer, 2003) Achilles’s famous rage, however, was fueled by grief. This grief was caused by the death of Patroclus: his dearest friend, closest companion, and arguably, his lover.” (Wittenberg, 2023). In the book ‘The Song of Achilles’ Miller highlights this deep connection of Achilles and Patroclus by retelling the legendary Trojan war binding it with a romance of two young men” (Stofanikova, 2022). “It was normal for young boys to maintain relationships, as Bryne Fone explains: “Homosexuality was, in Dorian Greece, and to a lesser extent in Attic Greece, legal, sanctioned, praised; “However, there were specific roles attributed to either partner: erastes and eromenos, terms traditionally used in ancient Greece to describe homosexual

relationships, as one represents the older, wiser, and honorable partner, while the other is the younger, more delicate, beautiful, beardless, and almost feminine one” (Maurice, 2017).

Therefore, this research analyses the South Asian perspective of queer identities using Shehan Karunatilaka’s ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida’ while aligning it with Madeline Miller’s ‘The Song of Achilles’ using their shared and parallel themes. Moreover, this critical review highlights the importance of inclusive narratives in shaping societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative approach was executed in order to explore extensive narrative, social and political context encapsulated in both novels, eliciting the portrayal of queer identities. Furthermore, to investigate the portrayal of queer identities in these novels re-reading the novels was taken as the data collection method. Critical reading of the novels was done through the analysis of dialogues, character interactions, contexts and narrative developments that highlight the aspects of queer experiences. Besides, detailed notes on specific scenes, character arcs, and thematic elements that contribute to the portrayal of queer identities were done during the textual critical reading.

The gathered data was analyzed using the combination of queer theory, semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis. Each of these methods provided a unique perspective, interpretation of the texts and provided a comprehensive understanding of the representation of queer identities. By applying the queer theory to Karunatilaka’s ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida’, the protagonist’s queer identity in the context of Sri Lankan society, considering how his sexuality is depicted in relation to cultural and political themes were identified. Similarly, in Miller’s ‘The Song of Achilles’, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, their emotional and romantic bond, and how it challenges traditional hero narratives were explored. Through the semiotic

analysis, the symbolic significances in the usage of metaphors, imageries and supernatural elements were explored to uncover the underlying messages in both novels. Moreover, the critical discourse analysis was used to analyze the narrative voice and how it differs and influences the socio-cultural and political background, how the narrator’s inner monologue works and how discourses on sexuality and identity are constructed, construed and challenged in both books.

Results and Discussion

Overview of Findings

Karunatilaka’s ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida’ and Miller’s ‘The Song of Achilles’ have been re-read through the semiotic and critical discourse analysis. This elicited that ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida’ vividly portrays the South Asian perspective on queer identities through its narration. Though Karunatilaka’s ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida’ draws parallels with Miller’s ‘The Song of Achilles’ through many aspects, it contrasts with its societal point of view on queer identities. While the Miller’s main character’s queer identity was accepted and included in the Greek society, Karunatilaka’s protagonist was asking to accept and include his identity throughout his afterlife narration while rejecting the taboo mark the queer identities bear in the Sri Lankan society. Thus, the trajectories are elicited differently.

Depiction of Queer Identities in ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida’

The protagonist, Maali Almeida accepts himself as a homosexual, but in a very normal manner “You were simply a handsome man who enjoyed beautiful boys.” (Karunatilaka, 2022). Moreover, he clearly rejects labeling him as a queer. “I am not queer, you say, as you said many times before.” (Karunatilaka, 2022). Where he considers the word “queer” is a kind of an insult to mock his identity. He fakes a relationship with his female best friend so he can enter into the society without a trouble, he fondles with men he thinks handsome, but he is always in love with his “beautiful boy” (Karunatilaka, 2022), ‘DD’, “the love

of his short sad life” (Karunatilaka, 2022).

In the novel Karunatilaka shows a part of the Sri Lankan society which no one talks much about. It is concealed and out from the spotlights due to the preferences of the people that part of the society holds. Maali’s homosexuality was a question to his father, to his job, then to his lover’s father which eventually led him to death, then even to the afterlife. “You have had more homophobic abuse in the afterlife than you had in twenty years of playing with boys” (Karunatilaka, 2022).

The second person narration of the novel is highly satirical and ironic, rich with symbols and metaphors. The protagonist shows a clear view of the Sri Lankan society on their perspective on queer identities and also the political turmoil of Sri Lanka in the 80s throughout his narration.

Depiction of Queer Identities in ‘The Song of Achilles’

The retelling of Iliad from the viewpoint of Patroclus, Achilles’ lover and companion. Patroclus the exiled son of King Menoetius falls in love with the war hero Achilles, whom he dearly loved until the very last minute of his life and even after his death. “He is half of my soul, as the poets say” (Miller, 2019). In this novel Miller mostly highlights the romantic bond between Patroclus and Achilles by giving more priority on expressing Patroclus’ feelings and the way it is seen by Achilles.

The novel is mainly based on ancient Greece where the society and the culture had a certain level of acceptance towards relationship between men. “One tent is enough, I hope? I’ve heard that you prefer to share. Rooms and bedrolls both, they say.” “Many boys took each other for lovers.” (Miller, 2019). Their relationship was a normalized situation in ancient Greece, people didn’t abuse them or criticize them for their romantic bond.

The narrative style of the novel is highly poetic and it is rich with the personal feelings, excitements and love that Patroclus has for Achilles as it is under

the first-person narration. By blending a historical context with modern understandings of love and identity Miller creates a powerful narrative of queer love through the song of Achilles.

Parallels and Contrasts

Similarities

In both novels, the lovers bind themselves with blood oaths. “The blood oath in Yala was his idea, some new age brotherhood thing” (Karunatilaka, 2022). DD, Maali’s lover wanted to do it like his father and mother did which interprets the romantic bond they share. Similarly, the very same incident happens in ‘The Song of Achilles’, “A brother-in-arms sworn to a prince by blood oath and love.” (Miller, 2019). Both couples in the contexts of the two novels bring up their relationships to a certain concrete level in a physical gesture by using this blood oath.

Moreover, both protagonists suffer from parental absence in their lives, and it notably impacts on their queer identities and emotional well-being. For instance, Maali talks about his grief stating, “You sob like you never did when Dada left your Amma” (Karunatilaka, 2022), highlighting a profound emotional neglect that leaves him seeking validation elsewhere, that he doesn’t trust the bond and relationship between men and women. Similarly, in *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus states, “Not from my father, who’d never think of it. Not from my mother, who sometimes didn’t know me” (Miller, 2019), indicating a longing for connection that is unmet. Moreover, these statements not only show the parental neglect but also raise a question about traditional marriage between men and women, where both Maali and Patroclus fail to receive the validation typically expected of children.

Differences

In Karunatilaka’s novel though Maali had many connections with other handsome men, his true love was ‘DD’. However, DD easily forgot him and moved on with his life after Maali’s death. “DD stays in the car with his bespectacled white boy. He tells them

that he wants nothing to do with your photos or your death.” (Karunatilaka, 2022). On the other hand in Miller’s ‘The Song of Achilles’ both Patroclus and Achilles die for each other. Patroclus goes to war to protect Achilles’ honor and gets killed then Achilles dies after taking revenge for his lover’s death and they are united again after their deaths “Their hands meet, and light spills in a flood, like a hundred golden urns pouring out the sun” (Miller, 2019).

When considering the social and cultural contexts of the novel the acceptance of their identities inside of their respective societies plays a remarkable role. When the ancient Greek Society accepted the relationship between men, the Sri Lanka society as portrayed by Karunatilaka does not allow queer identities and relationships to be normative but “unnatural acts” (Karunatilaka, 2022).

Understanding the queer representation in the South Asian context

Both novels ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida’ and ‘The Song of Achilles’ offer two sides of queer identities in the same world where it is celebrated, valued and included, however in the other part it is considered as a taboo, marginalized and criticized. Karunatilaka’s ‘The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida’ accentuates the criminalization and marginalization of queer identities in late 20th-century Sri Lanka. This contrast underscores the importance of cultural specificity in understanding queer experiences. When Miller richly celebrates the romance between two men by taking one of the oldest literary works in Western literature as the foundation for the story, Karunatilaka brings out a stagnated mindset and the view point of the majority of South Asian countries through his narrative. These works promote inclusive narratives, encouraging South Asian literature to reflect a broader spectrum of identities. Their success underscores the demand for diverse stories that enrich cultural discourse on queer identities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of how ‘The Seven Moon of

Maali Almeida’ embodies the South Asian perspective of queer identities drawing parallels and contrasts with ‘The Song of Achilles’ provides valuable insights into the portrayal of queer identities across different cultures and historical periods. It highlights the progress and ongoing challenges in achieving societal acceptance for queer individuals, emphasizing the need of inclusivity and, critical role of literature in shaping and reflecting cultural attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities.

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