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## **Queer Identities in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Karunatilaka (2022) and *The Song of Achilles* by Miller (2019): 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 Karunatilaka (2022) and *The Song of Achilles* by Miller (2019) from a South Asian perspective to examine how cultural, historical, and socio-political aspects of their respective 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. 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 narratives using critical discourse analysis. The data is analysed 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 novels while illuminating on the fact that they both appeal for an inclusive society.

**Keywords:** Comparative analysis, Inclusivity, Representation queer identities, South Asian perspective.

## Introduction

Recent trends in contemporary novels include writing on queerness. “Queer is used as an umbrella term for sexual minorities. It was used to show the negativity and 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).

Against this background, this study analyses how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* embodies some South Asian perspectives on queer identities, drawing parallels and contrasts with *The Song of Achilles*.

” ... sex, gender 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” (Bates, Chin and Becker, 2022).

These two novels vividly capture the traditional and counter-heteronormative paradigms of identity, gender, societal norms and love, which portrays the idea of queer identities. Also, this study demonstrates how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* embodies some South Asian perspectives on queer identities, and how these portrayals draw parallels and contrasts with those in *The Song of Achilles* and illuminate 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 in 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 scholars in these fields to foster a more holistic approach to future literary analysis.

In practical aspects, this research can serve in 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.”

An attempt is made here 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 them and those in *The Song of Achilles*. Its 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 developments used in portraying queer relationships. Moreover, the central questions that guide this study are: how are the queer identities depicted through the main characters in the two novels? In addition, what similarities and differences can be identified in the portrayal of the queer relationships in them? By addressing these questions and objectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of what is meant by queer representation, particularly in a 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 Karunatilaka (2022), 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 viewpoint of Patroclus. The novel is set in the ancient Greece, during the time during the time of the Trojan War, and it centers upon the queer relationship that Achilles and Patroclus had while showing the socio-cultural and political situations at that time. As mentioned earlier, both books demonstrate different perspectives about queer identities in their 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).

Karunatilaka’s *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022), and Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* (1994) align with each other 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 Maali Almeida* (2022) shares the same political background, and the cultural issue like in *Funny Boy* on where society considers the queer identity as a taboo. Karunatilaka’s dead narrator tells the story about some Tamil genocide believed to have been committed during the separatist war waged in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009 by the Tamil terrorist movement, the LTTE.

“The novel unravels atrocities of 1983 enraged through the LTTE, the government, the Marxist radicals. And also, Karunatilaka (2022) 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 Rerview 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 a perspective of Patroclus who was Achilles' lover. The opening lines of the Iliad give 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 a South Asian perspective of queer identities using Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Mali Almeida* while aligning it with Madline 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

By applying the queer theory to Karunatilaka's *the Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the protagonist's queer identity in the context of the Sri Lankan society can be perceived along with his sexuality depicted in relation to his cultural and political orientations. Similarly, in Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, along with their emotional and romantic bond, can be perceived in relation to the challenges explored in traditional hero

narratives. Through a semiotic analysis of the symbolism that emerges from the imagery inspired by supernatural elements and the metaphorical configurations that result from it were explored to uncover the underlying messages in both novels. Moreover, under a critical discourse analysis of the two books, focus is laid on the two respective narrative voices along with their variations in response to the socio-cultural and political background of the respective settings, how the respective narrators' inner monologues work, and how their discourses on sexuality and identity are constructed, construed and challenged.

## Results and Discussion

Although Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* draws parallels with Miller's *The Song of Achilles* in many respects, it contrasts with the other in its societal point of view on queer identities. While the Miller's main character's queer identity is accepted and included in the Greek society, Karunatilaka's protagonist pleads to accept and include his identity throughout his afterlife narration while rejecting the stigma that queer identities generally bear in the Sri Lankan society. Thus, the trajectories of the two novels are elicited differently.

### Queer identities in the even 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 the label of him as a queer. "I am not queer, you say, as you said many times before" (Karunatilaka, 2022). He considers the epithet "queer" to be 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 any trouble. He fondles 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 (2022) shows a part of the Sri Lankan society, which no one talks much about. It is concealed and out of the spotlight 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"

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 1980s throughout his narration.

### Queer identities in the Song of Achilles

In this novel, Homer's great epic *The Iliad* is retold from one of its central characters, Achilles' lover and companion, Patroclus' point of view. 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 Achillis by giving more priority to expressing Patroclus' feelings and the way it is seen by Achilles.

The novel is mainly based on ancient Greece, where the society and culture had a certain level of acceptance towards romantic relationships 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, where people did not abuse or criticize them for their romantic bond.

The narrative style of the novel is highly poetic, and it is rich with the personal feelings, excitement 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*.

### 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 through a physical gesture by using this blood oath.

Moreover, both protagonists suffer from parental absence in their lives, and it notably impacts 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, as he does not 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, although 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 within their respective societies plays a remarkable role. While the ancient Greek Society accepted the relationship between men, the Sri Lankan society, as portrayed by Karunathilaka does not allow

queer identities and relationships to be normative but “unnatural acts” (Karunatilaka, 2022).

### Understanding the queer representation in a South Asian context

The two novels, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and *The Song of Achilles* offer two types of treatment queer identities receive in two different settings in the same world. In one, it is celebrated, valued and included. In the other, it is considered taboo, marginalized, and criticized. Karunatilaka’s *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* accentuates the criminalization and marginalization of queer identities in the 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 addresses a stagnated mindset and the viewpoint 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.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of how *The Seven Moon of Maali Almeida* embodies a 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 for inclusivity and, critical role of literature in shaping and reflecting cultural attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities.

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