

## Rethinking Time in Postcolonial Fiction: A Study of Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

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**ABSTRACT:** This research examines the nonlinear and spectral representation of time in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka. The study analyzes how the novel departs from traditional linear models of time by engaging with concepts such as relational time, hetero-temporality, and lived duration. Using an interdisciplinary framework that draws upon physics, historiography, and literary theory, the research demonstrates that the novel portrays time as fragmented, recursive, and ethically significant. It foregrounds that Karunatilaka's spectral narrative structure reflects a postcolonial condition where memory, trauma, and historical violence are entangled across human and planetary dimensions. The findings suggest that the novel offers a new narrative logic: one that challenges dominant historical paradigms and reimagines temporality as a relational and moral force within postcolonial literature.

**Keywords:** Hetero temporality, duree, relational time, spectral temporality, chronotope, planetary consciousness

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## Introduction

Time, as both a philosophical concept and narrative strategy, remains a contested terrain in postcolonial literature, as it has been consistently reimagined by both eastern and western scholars. Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* exemplifies this by portraying time as spectral, relational, and ethically charged. Drawing on Henri Bergson's notion of *durée* or lived time, Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope, Carlo Rovelli's relational time, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's hetero-temporality, this paper explores how Karunatilaka's novel disrupts secular, nationalist, and linear historical frameworks. By analyzing the novel's fragmented narrative structure and spectral temporality, this study addresses how time operates as a dynamic force in the novel and how it challenges existing temporal paradigms in postcolonial contexts.

This study draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope which is defined as the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relations that "makes narrative events concrete and visible" (84). This research explores the afterlife in *Seven Moons* as a space where time thickens around memory, violence, and ethical reckoning. It also employs Henri Bergson's notion of *durée* that is a "continuous flow of qualitative multiplicity" (77). Maali's ghostly consciousness is analyzed in both past and present with an interpenetration of sensation and memory without adhering to any chronological order. Together, these frameworks allow the novel's spectral temporality to be examined as both spatially embodied and experientially lived.

This study further addresses the limits of traditional linear models by demonstrating how time is experienced in postcolonial fiction. In *The Order of Time*, Rovelli articulates that "time is ignorance" and that "events are not ordered by a single universal time" (Rovelli 34). His theory views time not as a constant of nature but as something that emerges from relationship between space and time. Similarly, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chakrabarty has questioned human-centered ideas of history (Chakrabarty 18). He introduces the concept of "hetero-temporality," where different timelines such as colonial, ecological, and spiritual coexist. These disrupt the Enlightenment belief in linear progress (Chakrabarty 67). While these theories have received growing attention in science and historiography, they have rarely been applied to South Asian fiction. This research seeks to bridge that gap.

The aim of this paper is to explore how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* presents time as an "entanglement of voices, memories, and futures" (Chakrabarty 92). Time is not a single, forward-moving path. The contention of this research is to reflect that Karunatilaka's spectral temporality stiches the

personal, historical, and planetary together into a tangled tapestry. It is like a cosmic loom where the dead whisper across the threads of time. This metaphor captures both the intellectual depth and ethical urgency of the novel's fragmented structure. Its ghostly narration forces a confrontation with unresolved histories and calls attention to themes of memory, justice, and recurring violence.

This paper has three main objectives: first, to examine how the novel represents time using Rovelli's relational theory and Chakrabarty's planetary frameworks; second, to connect these with earlier theories such as Bergson's *durée* and Bakhtin's *chronotope*; and third, to place the novel within a tradition of literary experimentation with time. It also draws comparison with other literary authors who are known for experimenting with the depiction of time in fiction. For instance, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* blurs the line between inner time and clock time. Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* show how trauma disrupts temporal order. Karunatilaka's ghost-driven narrative continues and transforms these experiments in a South Asian and postcolonial setting.

The research is guided by the following questions: How does *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* express the ideas of relational and entangled time? How does its treatment of time align with or differ from classical ideas like lived time and chronotopic form? And how does Karunatilaka's vision of time deepen current debates about memory, death, and postcolonial history?

Set in the final phase of Sri Lanka's civil war, Karunatilaka's novel shows time not as a clear progression but as a haunted stillness. The spectral protagonist Maali observes, "the minutes folded in on themselves" (Karunatilaka 106). This image reflects Rovelli's idea that "the flow of time is an illusion" (Rovelli 15). Furthermore, Chakrabarty's view that human time is part of larger ecological and cosmic processes also exhibits the same idea. For Rovelli, time is not a container one moves through, but something created through interaction. Chakrabarty adds that the human sense of time must now be understood alongside geological and environmental rhythms. His perspective unsettles traditional, human-focused narratives of history. Bergson's idea of *durée* also echoes this concept. *Duree* is defined as "the ceaseless melting of states into one another" (Bergson 100). For Bergson, time is internal and continuous. It is not an entity that can break into fixed units. Bakhtin's *chronotope* that merges space and time within the structure of a narrative, allows time in the novel to appear thick, circular, and full of transformative power.

This study focuses specifically on how time, memory, and historical violence are depicted in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It does not aim to provide

a full political history of Sri Lanka or a deep analysis of religious afterlife beliefs except only where they affect the novel's sense of time.

This study employs a qualitative literary research methodology based on close reading and textual analysis of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It applies an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates narratology, philosophy of time, and postcolonial theory, with particular reference to Bakhtin's chronotope, Bergson's concept of *durée*, Rovelli's relational time, and Chakrabarty's hetero-temporality. The analysis focuses on narrative structure, spectral perspective, and temporal disruption to examine how the novel reimagines time as an ethical and postcolonial construct.

The value of this research lies in its cross-disciplinary approach. By reading Karunatilaka's novel through ideas from quantum theory, historical thinking, and postcolonial studies, it offers new ways to understand how literature can deal with environmental, historical, and ethical issues. The spectral temporality in *Seven Moons* is both personal and planetary. It challenges dominant historical narratives and suggests that postcolonial fiction can rethink time in an age shaped by crisis, fragmentation, and global uncertainty.

## **Literature Review**

This research explores the theoretical frameworks that shape the understanding of time in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Moving beyond traditional linear views, it engages alternative models that reflect the novel's spectral and fragmented temporality. Carlo Rovelli's concept of relational time and Dipesh Chakrabarty's theorization of historical time in postcolonial and planetary contexts are central to this research. Theories by Mikhail Bakhtin and Henri Bergson are also used to provide a broader foundation. Additionally, comparisons with other literary works that experiment with non-linear time further highlight the novel's contemporary relevance. Some Jstor and other scholarly articles are also considered. Out of reach articles is the limitation of this research.

### *2.1 Rovelli's Relational Time and Its Quantum Nature*

Carlo Rovelli's theory of relational time rethinks time not as a universal flow but as something that emerges from the relationships between systems. He describes the sense of "flowing time" as a "mental illusion" created by the complexity of interactions among physical systems (The Order of Time 15). In this view, time is not an objective backdrop but a product of events in relation. Scholars such as Mauro Dorato note that "temporal becoming is perspectival" (Dorato 280). Furthermore, Slavov emphasizes that the "passage of time is relative to the system of observation" (Slavov 217). These insights reveal a

major shift: time is no longer seen as stable and singular, but as a local, emergent property shaped by context.

This theoretical shift offers a compelling lens for reading *Seven Moons*. In the novel, Maali's posthumous journey is not linear. His experiences unfold in shifting sequences shaped by emotion, memory, and environment. This fragmented temporality aligns closely with Rovelli's relational model. Time in the novel appears unstable, and it is driven not by chronology, but by relationships.

Although Rovelli's work is influential in physics and philosophy, it has had limited application in literary studies, especially in postcolonial contexts. This research addresses that gap by applying his relational time theory to a South Asian narrative. Karunatilaka's novel, through its ghostly protagonist and spectral setting, constructs a kind of quantum narrative. It is a narrative where events, emotions, and memories generate time instead of following it.

### **Chakrabarty's Historical Time and Postcolonial Narratives**

Dipesh Chakrabarty challenges the dominance of Western, secular, and linear models of historical time. In *Provincializing Europe*, he introduces the concept of "hetero-temporality" that refers to the idea that multiple, overlapping temporalities coexist within the same historical moment (Chakrabarty 67). These may include colonial, ecological, mythic, or spiritual timelines that disrupt the notion of a shared path toward modernity. Pasha observes that Chakrabarty's theory resists "new universalism" and helps maintain "postcolonial difference" within global debates (Pasha 122). Lee extends this discussion in the context of the Anthropocene, noting Chakrabarty's concept to "read the human story alongside the geologic" (Lee 19).

The Anthropocene which is the era defined by human impact on Earth's systems, forces rethinking of human time alongside vast and nonhuman scales. This disrupts Enlightenment era that supports linear time and secular history while replacing these with an awareness of shared vulnerability and uncertainty. Chakrabarty's model of entangled time becomes significantly relevant in narratives that deal with historical trauma, ecological crisis, and memory.

Karunatilaka's novel reflects this complex temporality. In *Seven Moons*, memories of colonialism, civil war, and personal loss are layered and recursive. Maali's afterlife is not a clean break from the past but a space where unresolved histories constantly return. The novel dramatizes the "hetero-temporality" Chakrabarty theorizes: it is a space where trauma and memory disturb the flow of time and refuse closure.

This postcolonial approach to time that challenges the linear narrative is also evident in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* collapses chronology. It states, "it was as if time had turned back and they were living Sunday all over again" (Márquez 298). Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* also depicts time as "a handful of splinters, a broken mirror that cuts and reflects" (Cortázar 102). Marquez, *Hopscotch*, and Karunatilaka all present time not as a neutral sequence but as a chaotic force shaped by history, memory, and violence.

Through Maali's journey, Karunatilaka joins a broader postcolonial tradition that uses spectral and disrupted timelines to critique colonial histories all the while challenging the Eurocentric models of progress. His portrayal of the afterlife becomes a site where personal trauma, collective memory, and planetary uncertainty all intersect.

### ***Bakhtin's Chronotope***

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope which is the intrinsic link between time and space in narrative, offers another valuable framework. In *Dialogic Imagination*, he defines the chronotope as the structure that "makes narrative events concrete and measurable" (Bakhtin 84). This idea has been further developed by scholars such as Bemong, who argues that during times of catastrophe, narrative space and time become tightly fused (Bemong 71). Thus, it intensifies the reader's experience. He notes that the chronotope often centers on the "acting subject," that shows how individual agency is shaped by historical and spatial contexts (75).

In *Seven Moons*, the afterlife becomes a unique chronotope. Maali moves through a ghostly version of Colombo where physical space is warped by memory, and time no longer behaves predictably. Narrative time "thickens," in Bakhtin's words, around key moments, especially those tied to moral conflict, unresolved history, or loss (97). The city becomes a haunted landscape which is charged with ethical weight and historical residue.

T. S. Eliot also experiments with spatial temporality in *Four Quartets*. He articulates, "[the] still point of the turning world" holds together spiritual stillness and temporal flux (Eliot 14). For him, time is a layered experience and not a linear one. Yeats has experimented with the same thought in his works as well. For example, in *The Second Coming*, he writes in the opening lines: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" (Yeats 1). The widening gyre symbolizes the spiral of history that unravels itself in circular manner. In *Seven Moons*, Karunatilaka's use of the afterlife as a narrative setting also allows for overlapping dimensions of space and time. Here, time is spectral which is haunted by non-linear history and recursive trauma.

Like Eliot's and Yeats' speakers, Maali also exists in a loop. He is caught between the past and the present, and between memory and forgetting. His spectral journey unfolds in a geography where time bends, stops, or repeats. These chronotopic disruptions reflect deeper questions about justice, history, and how one remembers the dead. By positioning Maali's ghostly narrative within this layered space-time, Karunatilaka builds a setting where memory is hauntingly embodied in people's lives and time itself becomes unstable.

These modernist experiments resonate with Karunatilaka's treatment of the afterlife; this afterlife is not an endpoint but a layered space where the spectral past, recursive memory, and moral reckoning collapse into a singular, haunting geography. Like Eliot's and Yeats' poetic speakers, Maali exists in a temporal loop, witnessing the unresolved crises of his life and country.

### **Bergson's Lived Time and Time as Movement**

Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, or lived time, offers a way of understanding temporality that centers on inner experience rather than mechanical measurement. In *Time and Free Will*, he describes real time as "a continuous flow of qualitative multiplicity" (Bergson 77). Rather than discrete units, Bergson's time is fluid, felt, and constantly in motion. Mullarkey expands on this by foregrounding that Bergson's stress on "movement and becoming" resists turning time into space-like segments (Mullarkey 58). Thus, time becomes repetitive that functions in non-linear and sometimes, circular manner.

Karunatilaka's portrayal of Maali's consciousness in the afterlife reflects this fluid model. Maali does not pass through time in order. Instead, he drifts between memories, sensations, and visions. He remarks, "memories pour in, not in order, but in waves" (Karunatilaka 214). This image perfectly illustrates Bergson's lived time, where inner states blend into one another and moments are emotionally charged rather than sequenced in a linear form. Karunatilaka, thereby, resists the segmented and clock-based temporality inherited from colonial modernity. Instead, it emphasizes on a fragmented and recurring experience of time.

This fluid temporality finds analogue in literary modernism. In *Duino Elegies*, Rainer Maria Rilke writes that "all we can hold on to / is what changes" (Rilke 35). Death, in this view, is not an end but a transformation. Similarly, in *Seven Moons*, Maali moves across life and afterlife that creates meaning through emotional transitions rather than linear events. Wallace Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" suggests that human perception reshapes the world: "It was her voice that made / the sky acutest at its vanishing" (Stevens 21). Here, meaning arises not from the external world but from how it is perceived

and remembered. Maali's experience of time that is shaped by his ghostly perspective and emotional intensity also falls along the same lines. His journey shows that time is not only fractured but also ethically and affectively charged.

Karunatilaka's narrative constructs a world where time is spectral, entangled, and shaped by memory, trauma, and mortality. Using concepts such as relational time, hetero-temporality, the chronotope, and lived duration, the novel challenges empirical and secular time. Instead, it offers a complex and emotionally layered temporality.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

#### **Spectral Temporality and Narrative Form**

This section examines how time functions in the novel, especially in relation to the afterlife setting which contain traces of fragmented memory. The boundary between history and haunting consistently blur. It addresses two key research questions:

1. How does Karunatilaka represent time as relational and entangled?
2. How does this representation reflect or diverge from classical temporal theories?

**Chronotope and Posthumous Time:** The novel opens with Maali waking up in the afterlife where he is already cut off from ordinary, chronological time. This moment introduces a fusion of space and time that Mikhail Bakhtin calls chronotope. He argues that narrative time "thickens" and becomes "visible, sensuously perceptible" through particular spatial forms (*The Dialogic Imagination* 97). In *Seven Moons*, the afterlife is not a spiritual abstraction but a lived geography where time folds, repeats, and collapses.

When Maali notes that "the minutes folded in on themselves", it becomes clear that time in the afterlife is unstable and subjective (Karunatilaka 106). This aligns with what Bemong calls "catastrophic chronotopes," (71). Here moments of crisis reshape temporal experience. Thus, the afterlife is not timeless but intensely temporal, as it thickens with memories, emotions, and anticipations. This spectral chronotope allows Karunatilaka to disrupt standard narrative progression; instead, it builds a world where time loops, fractures, and rewinds. Maali re-experiences political violence, personal betrayals, and his investigative past not in linear flashbacks but in sensory and emotional surges.

**Lived Duration and Ghostly Consciousness:** Karunatilaka's depiction of time as non-linear aligns closely with Bergson's theory of *durée*, which he defines as "heterogeneous, continuous, and qualitative multiplicity" (*Time and Free Will*

77). For Bergson, time is not external to us but internal, as it is experienced through feeling and perception. Maali's ghostly perspective that consistently shifts between memory, vision, and spectral observation, embodies what Bergson terms "pure duration" (Bergson 100). Moments flow into each other, as it blends past and present.

A powerful instance of this occurs when Maali looks at a photograph of "a boy with no arms and flies in his eyes" and is suddenly transported to the moment he took it (Karunatilaka 142). It is an overwhelming moment, as he gets overcome with heat, panic, and horror. This scene doesn't operate like a standard flashback. On the contrary, it collapses time into sensation, and memory becomes physically and emotionally real. This fusion mirrors how Bergson views memory as lived, and not something which is stored. It also reflects how Karunatilaka rewrites memory that has the ability to break into the present.

The temporal blurring portrayed by Karunatilaka is also reflected in other literary works. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf shows a similar collapse when Clarissa hears "a pistol shot in the street outside" and is immediately pulled into memory (35). The boundary between now and then dissolves in a moment of heightened perception. Maali's ghostly awareness also causes time to warp. He is both present and absent; he lives both inside and outside the moment.

This idea is also explored in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. He articulates, "We, who squander our sorrows, look away from death as though it were not at the center of life" (Rilke 41). In Karunatilaka's novel, Maali can no longer look away. Death surrounds him, and his task is to make sense of what remains. He does this not by following time forward but by returning to unresolved moments. His consciousness becomes a space where time is reordered in a non-linear manner; it is governed by emotional and ethical urgency.

In one scene, Maali floats above a grieving crowd after a bombing and realizes he is "hovering above their grief," (Karunatilaka 189). He could hear the cries that blend with sounds from his own funeral. The overlapping soundscape depicted in this scene captures a deep temporal entanglement; it characterizes ghostly perception. Maali does not simply observe time; he inhabits it differently. He becomes both a witness and a memory simultaneously.

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* captures a similar idea. He demonstrates the different temporal layers being converge into a moment of clarity in "the still point of the turning world" (14). Maali's experience echoes the similar spiritual stillness within chaos. His posthumous vision brings together history, memory, and mortality in ways that question linear models of time.

## Relational Time and Narrative Perspective

The novel's treatment of time is deeply shaped by Carlo Rovelli's theory of relational time. Rovelli argues that "there is no single time flow" and that time "emerges from interactions and not from the passage of a universal clock" (*Order of Time*, 15, 41). From the moment Maali realizes he has perished, time ceases to be in a linear sequence. It rather becomes a relational field activated through his interactions with other ghosts, his past, his unresolved tasks, and the hidden truths of political violence.

Maali's memories do not appear in order, as these are often triggered by smells, sounds, or familiar spaces in Colombo. This resonates with Rovelli's claim that "time is not a container for events; it is a web of relationships" (Rovelli 48). For instance, Maali follows Sena to the morgue and upon seeing a corpse, recalls the photo he took of the man "just days before he was gutted and thrown into Beira Lake" (Karunatilaka 176).

## Temporal Collapse and Quantum Becoming

The moment that takes Maali to one of his memories demonstrates how sensory prompts collapse the boundary between past and present. This eventually emphasizes the relational nature of memory. A similar dynamic is found in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where "the world was so recent that many things lacked names," and history repeats itself in blurred cycles (García Márquez 1). In Karunatilaka's novel, Maali's identity is shaped not by a single timeline, but by layered encounters that merge political memory with personal reflection. His search for his murderer becomes less about resolution and more about confronting his past with all its ethical entanglements.

Karunatilaka's narrative structure draws a literary analogue with Mauro Dorato's interpretation of quantum relationalism. He states, "temporal becoming is perspectival and local" (Dorato 281). The novel avoids a central narrative clock, as it shifts through subjective timelines, while allowing time to emerge from emotional and ethical collisions. A compelling example is Maali's recollection of leaking "a photo of Minister Fernando's corpse in a compromising position," (Karunatilaka 197). Interestingly, it only resurfaces when the ghost of the informant appears both angry and mutilated. This spectral confrontation fuses action, consequence, and memory into a single and emotionally charged instant. Furthermore, Karunatilaka invites readers to move across temporal fragments instead of following a straightforward plot. Time in *Seven Moons* is recursive, unpredictable, and shaped by affect, perception, and relational memory. This stands in sharp contradiction with clock-time or conventional narrative causality.

### **Hetero-temporality and the Postcolonial Archive**

This section examines how Karunatilaka's narrative aligns with Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of hetero-temporality. The novel questions both Western models of linear historicism and the nationalist impulse to produce singular historical narratives. In doing so, it presents a deeply layered meditation on time, memory, and violence within postcolonial and spectral frameworks.

In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty introduces "hetero-temporality" as the coexistence of multiple and unequal timelines within the same historical moment. He argues that secular, linear time that is dominant in Western historiography often excludes other ways of experiencing time, particularly those rooted in postcolonial life (Chakrabarty 67). In *The Seven Moons*, these conflicting temporalities are embedded in the novel's very structure: the afterlife becomes a space where spiritual, political, and historical timelines intersect and disrupt each other.

Maali's narrative unfolds through flashbacks, dream-sequences, and hallucinations. All of these techniques resist the straightforward recounting of Sri Lanka's civil conflict. Instead of a linear war history, the novel presents a haunted archive; it becomes a palimpsest of disappearances, killings, and memory that accumulates like "ash over ash, body over body" (Karunatilaka 119). This image illustrates not only the physical residue of violence but also the layered, lingering nature of historical trauma. Maali's memory does not follow a clear sequence. It rises in fragments that manifests being chemical, visceral, and involuntary in nature. He reflects, "memory isn't chronological; it's chemical" (Karunatilaka 133). This framing emphasizes how trauma distorts memory, making it eruptive and embodied rather than ordered.

Maali reminisces a time when "an arm severed mid-punch and a man's head in a child's lap" (Karunatilaka 137). This demonstrates the collapse of temporal logic. His memories break into the narrative without warning or transition that illustrates how violence continues to echo in the body long after the event. Chakrabarty calls this form of storytelling the historical "out-of-jointness" of the postcolonial world (Chakrabarty 66). In such a world, history is not a tidy sequence but a set of open wounds that persists on being unfinished, ungrievable, however, still speaking.

The spiritual dimension of the novel further supports Chakrabarty's point that secular time is always shadowed by the sacred, the spectral, and the affective. In this regard, Maali is not simply reliving his past; he is confronting history's ethical residue. His realization, "you don't just see the lives they lived, you feel the lives they stole," foregrounds how memory transforms into moral

awareness (Karunatilaka 226). Through this lens, Karunatilaka offers a form of postcolonial critique that doesn't reject Enlightenment ideals outright, but it inhabits them differently, as Chakrabarty has pointed out (Chakrabarty 43). The *Seven Moons* does not discard the ideas of justice or truth, as it reframes them within a spectral world where ghosts demand acknowledgment, and memory becomes a form of resistance.

**Fragmented Temporality and Literary Parallels:** By disrupting narrative chronology, Karunatilaka situates his novel within a literary tradition that resists linear time. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* famously condenses centuries of Colombian history into a cyclical, surreal structure, noting that "the past was always just ahead" (García Márquez 381). In a similar spirit, *The Seven Moons* allows Maali to move through past and future simultaneously. He observes that "you see the past and the future stacked like files in a cabinet" (Karunatilaka 212). These memories may be disordered in time, but they remain clear in emotional force. Hence, Karunatilaka has invited the readers to contemplate on time where past, present, and future do not conform to the linear and traditional modes of recording history.

The recursive temporality enables Karunatilaka to portray history not as a completed event but as something that continues to unfold. He suggests that the postcolonial subject is caught in a loop where violence repeats and memory lingers. The ghost-narration is not only a literary choice; it is a political one. It compels readers to see history as open-ended, unsettled, and emotionally unfinished.

**Planetary Entanglements and Ethical Time:** The temporal fluidity in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* also resonates with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the narrative drifts through internal consciousness rather than external action. Like Clarissa Dalloway, Maali is haunted by war, memory, and fragmented relationships. However, unlike Woolf's characters, he is already dead. When Clarissa hears of Septimus's suicide, "She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself" (Woolf 186). Here, her momentary collapse of self into another forebears the shared temporality of mourning. Similarly, Maali remarks, "You see your memories not like a film reel, but like a shattered mirror" (Karunatilaka 211). In both narratives, memory appears in non-linear fragments, as it evokes emotional rather than sequential truths.

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* similarly explores the convergence of personal, historical, and metaphysical time. In "Burnt Norton", Eliot writes, "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future" (Eliot 3). This perspective draws a literary analogy with Karunatilaka's portrayal of time as

recursive and haunted. Maali reflects, “The future has already happened. It’s just that no one remembers it” (Karunatilaka 198). The inversion of prophecy and memory resonates with Chakrabarty’s claim that climate change and death unsettle the Enlightenment’s division between past and future. It eventually requires humans to “inhabit” time differently, albeit not through mastery, but by embracing its entanglements (Chakrabarty 18). Here, time becomes less a straight line and more a web of historical, ecological, and existential threads.

A similar entangled temporality appears in Derek Walcott’s “Omeros”, where personal memory and colonial history collapse into mythic space. “The sea is history,” Walcott writes, suggesting that time is not linear but sedimented (45). It is built layer upon layer. Karunatilaka’s portrayal of the afterlife similarly presents a sea of ghosts. These may be political dissidents, journalists, revolutionaries, and/or lovers who exist within a spectral space where history is never concluded. As Maali puts it, “The dead are stuck with what they remember. The living are stuck with what they forget” (Karunatilaka 221). In both narratives, history is affective and unresolved, shaped not by dates but by emotional aftershocks.

In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chakrabarty extends his concept of hetero-temporality by emphasizing the convergence of human and nonhuman histories in the Anthropocene. He argues that “geological time and human time now intersect” (Chakrabarty 20). While Karunatilaka’s novel does not explicitly address ecological crisis, it evokes planetary consciousness through its representation of spiritual ecology. The war’s violence does not remain within national boundaries; it permeates the afterlife and even the natural world. Corpses continue to be dumped in Beira Lake; the evil forces keep polluting not only space but also cosmic order. Maali observes, “This war isn’t over. It will never be over. Not while there are graves unvisited and bones unburned” (Karunatilaka 247). Hence, historical violence becomes entangled with ecological decay.

The novel’s spectral ecology which manifests its narrative populated by ghosts, animal spirits, and elemental presences gestures toward a cosmological vision in which death is not a boundary but a relational event. Maali’s encounters with other spirits suggest an afterlife in which ethical reckoning continues beyond death. As Rovelli posits, “we are events within events” (112), and Karunatilaka adapts this idea through Maali’s realization: “You think death ends your obligations? That’s where they begin” (Karunatilaka 239). In this ethical temporality, the dead must revisit their choices, account for silences, and face unfinished histories.

One such encounter takes place with Sena, a revolutionary ghost, who declares, “You think the revolution was over when I died?” (Karunatilaka 215). In this “chat with the dead,” political debates persist beyond mortal life all the while accentuating the novel’s spectral ethics. History in *Seven Moons* does not close with death: it reopens through memory, regret, and haunting. Such scenes evoke the urgency of a planetary consciousness, where the past, present, and future are all morally entangled.

### Conclusion

This study has explored how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* reconfigures time as a spectral, relational, and ethically charged phenomenon. Rather than presenting history as linear, secular, or national, Karunatilaka frames it as fractured and haunted. It becomes an experience shaped by trauma, political violence, and cosmic implication. Through the literary device of the afterlife, time becomes nonlinear and morally resonant, allowing memory and justice to persist beyond human life.

The research was guided by three central questions. First, the novel was shown to enact Rovelli’s theory of relational time by presenting events that arise through interactions rather than succession. Maali’s memories are not chronological but are activated by emotional, ethical, and spatial triggers. This supports Rovelli’s claim that time is a “network of events” (Rovelli 93).

Second, the study examined how classical models of time such as Bergson’s *durée*, and Bakhtin’s chronotope are expanded to accommodate spectral and posthumous consciousness. Maali’s perception exemplifies Bergsonian duration, where time is lived rather than measured. His movement through a spiritual geography mirrors Bakhtin’s chronotope, wherein narrative time thickens around moments of ethical decision and spatial entanglement.

Third, drawing on Chakrabarty’s ideas of hetero-temporality and planetary history, the analysis showed how Karunatilaka situates Sri Lanka’s civil conflict within overlapping human, spiritual, and ecological timelines. The novel resists historical closure and nationalist teleology by keeping memory in circulation which is spectral, ethical, and emotional in nature.

The interdisciplinary significance of this research lies in its contribution to the study of time in postcolonial literature. It demonstrates that Karunatilaka’s novel is more than a political narrative; it is a cosmological and ethical reflection on temporality. Although the scope of the study did not permit a full exploration of Sri Lanka’s political and religious dynamics, it reveals how time operates as a critical medium through which history, identity, and justice are continuously negotiated.

In relation to global literary traditions, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* participates in a lineage of temporally experimental texts such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Hopscotch*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Four Quartets*, and “Omeros”. Yet Karunatilaka’s innovation lies in situating spectral narration within a South Asian postcolonial context, where time is not merely personal or historical, but planetary and ethical.

Future researchers may extend this framework to emerging fields such as spectral humanities, trauma studies, and planetary fiction, where questions of memory, afterlife, and ethical time are increasingly central. Within South Asian postcolonial studies, this approach enables a rethinking of historical violence beyond nationalist or secular timelines. By foregrounding non-linear temporality marked by recursive memory, violence, and loss, this study reconceptualizes time as both ethical and planetary. Such a reorientation opens new critical pathways for reading postcolonial narratives shaped by trauma, conflict, and ecological uncertainty.

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