

Sri Lanka: Shehan Karunatilaka brings joy and awakens old ghosts

Wednesday 26 October 2022, by [Daily FT](#) (Date first published: 20 October 2022).

Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka was awarded the Booker Prize by Camilla, the Queen Consort this week, marking a proud moment for the whole country. The prestigious prize worth 50,000 pounds is presented to a work of fiction published in the United Kingdom in English.

Karunatilaka's novel 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida' which won the award, is a supernatural satire set amid the tumultuous 1980s when Sri Lanka was gripped with two civil wars in the north and the south. The novel features a murdered photographer and his journey in the immediate afterlife. There are many characters in the novel including journalists, activists, academics and politicians who are loosely based on real individuals, both alive and dead, easily identified by many Sri Lankans. Fictional Maali Almeida like non-fictional Richard de Zoysa was killed because he angered someone in power with his work.

In his acceptance speech Karunatilaka touched on the deep-rooted divisions within the country, often manipulated by the political class to further their interests. "My hope is that in the not-too-distant future... Sri Lanka has understood that these ideas of corruption and race-baiting and cronyism have not worked and will never work," he said soon after accepting the award. It is a remarkable indictment not only of the State that has committed heinous crimes against its own people for the last 50 years but also of those who until this day cover-up and prevent accountability for those crimes.

While a satirical work of fiction, the novel exposes the tremendous loss of life and the enormous pain caused during the troubled times. To this day Sri Lanka has not reconciled the pain and suffering of many victims of this conflict, or for that matter any conflicts of political violence since independence. According to government commissions that were subsequently established, at least 43,000 Sri Lankan citizens, mostly educated Sinhala youth from the south were either extra judiciary executed or subjected to enforced disappearances during the 1987-89 period. The actual number is estimated to be over 60,000 with many sources suggesting it to be as high as 100,000. Less than a handful of individuals have been held accountable for these crimes.

In addition, over 12,000 individuals were killed in 1971 by the Sri Lankan State and tens of thousands were killed or subjected to enforced disappearance outside the battlefields during the 1983-2009 ethnic conflict.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's office and many other politicians were quick to congratulate Karunatilaka for his achievement. The Presidential Media Division tweeted, "President Ranil Wickremesinghe congratulates Shehan Kuranatilaka on becoming the second Sri Lankan born author to receive the prestigious Booker Prize..." It is supremely ironic and rather comical that these individuals who have either orchestrated the atrocities featured in Karunatikala's novel or had actively prevented accountability for those crimes are now congratulating him. President

Wickremesinghe was a Cabinet Minister in his maternal uncle, J.R. Jayewardene's government during the period under reference and an alleged paramilitary executioner during that time is currently Sri Lanka's permanent representative to the United Nations.

Karunatilaka's achievement and the limelight cast on his novel are reminders as to how the Sri Lankan State, past and present, have failed its citizens in delivering justice for numerous past crimes. Earlier this month Foreign Minister Ali Sabry vehemently opposed an accountability mechanism set up at the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to preserve evidence on violation of human rights in the country. This had become inevitable after Sri Lanka has for many years shown no progress or inclination to address these issues domestically. Minister Sabry was one of the politicians to congratulate Karunatilaka.

As Sri Lankans take pride in Karunatilaka's achievement, it is also a reminder of the ghosts that haunt us from our not too distant past. These are the same ghosts who lurk behind calls for military solutions for political problems and clampdowns on peaceful protests. Karunatilaka's satire reminds us of the need to face these many demons and ghosts and make amends to the many wrongs.

Daily FT

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Daily FT

https://www.ft.lk/ft_view_editorial/Shehan-Karunatilaka-brings-joy-and-awakens-old-ghosts/58-741124