

# How Has *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* Been Received in the Anglophone World?

## —A Systematic Analysis of Online Reader Reviews

Jie Li

School of Foreign Languages, Huanggang Normal University, Huanggang, China

Email: Jieli1549@gmail.com

**How to cite this paper:** Li, J. (2025). How Has *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* Been Received in the Anglophone World? *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 15, 847-866. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2025.159049>

**Received:** July 7, 2025

**Accepted:** September 15, 2025

**Published:** September 18, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

### Abstract

This article examines the readers' reception of the 2022 Booker Prize-winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* among English readers in the world. Empirically informed by 6194 English reviews posted online, this study draws on a corpus of online reader reviews and employs qualitative and thematic analysis to identify recurrent evaluative patterns. The findings show that the novel has been generally well-received by English readers worldwide. On the one hand, the positive reviews are centered on three aspects: its insight into Sri Lankan history, culture, and politics; creative writing and fantastic character portrayal, as well as strong humor and satire. Negative reviews, by contrast, converge on its abrupt shifts in time and heavy use of dialogue, too many characters and poor character development, too many brutal and violent depictions, and background knowledge of Sri Lanka's history and politics needed for a good comprehension of the novel.

### Keywords

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Reception, Reader Reviews, Anglophone World, Booker Prize

---

## 1. Introduction

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, authored by Shehan Karunatilaka, was awarded the Booker Prize in 2022. This prize is considered one of the most prestigious international literary honors, aiming to recognize the best English fiction or translation of the year. Owing to this critical award, the novel has become an instant bestseller in America and has been listed as one of the "*New York Times's* 100 Notable Books of 2022". Additionally, it was selected as "the Best Fiction Book

of 2022” by some mainstream newspaper reviews, including the *Washington Post*, *Times* (UK), *Financial Times*, and *The Guardian*. Karunatilaka’s Booker prize winning “not only solidified his global Sri Lankan stature but also brought a renewed international interest to Sri Lankan postcolonial politics” (Karunanayake, 2025: p. 212).

Although English literature is deemed as minor literature in Sri Lanka (Jayasuriya & Halpé, 2012), the world’s significant literary recognition of Karunatilaka’s new novel is “certainly iconic” (Jayasuriya & Karunanayake, 2025: p. 3) to Sri Lankans, as this is a milestone set by a Sri Lankan author in the Anglophone world. Since the prize serves as a vivid representation of a critical achievement made by contemporary South Asian English writers, it justifies and elevates the literary status of Shehan Karunatilaka, as Karunanayake (2025: p. 212) notes, “Karunatilaka has remained a leading authority with an unparalleled voice in global Sri Lankan literature”.

From the special perspective of a soul after death, the novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is developed in the contemporary Sri Lankan context, intricately and skillfully incorporates together elements of magic realism, political narrative, history and human rights (Sharma & Tripathi, 2023) to examine and reflect on the turbulent and traumatic period of the Sri Lankan Civil War. This historical fiction distinguishes itself as a political satire full of dark humor and supernatural forces. Meanwhile, it differentiates itself by its authenticity, thereby forming a unique and unconventional narrative style similar to journalistic truth-telling. Through the story of Maali Almeida, the protagonist who is a war photographer, Karunatilaka powerfully prompts readers to ponder over the enduring impact of civil war and a series of perplexing issues, including ethnic violence, state oppression, justice, and death, which have been persisting throughout Sri Lanka’s decades-long civil turmoil.

After its publication, the novel has attracted a broad range of responses from readers across the world, particularly on Amazon<sup>1</sup> and Goodreads<sup>2</sup>, which are popular online platforms for book sales (the former only) and reviews. Understanding readers’ responses is crucial for gaining insights into how contemporary readers interpret and receive this literary masterpiece and how South Asian literature circulates in the international literary market. Hence, this paper aims to systematically investigate how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* has been received among readers in the Anglophone world through a systematic analysis of the online readers’ reviews. Meanwhile, it strives to measure the sentiment tendency shown in the reviews and explore the underlying factors shaping these sentiments.

## 2. Literature Review

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* has garnered some attention from the academic circle, and the current research on this novel mainly focuses on aspects such

---

<sup>1</sup>See website: <https://www.amazon.cn>.

<sup>2</sup>See website: <https://www.goodreads.com>.

as artistic narrative techniques and the literary value in revealing and resolving social issues.

First, several studies focus on the narrative art of the novel. Mathew (2024) analyzed the historical aspects of liminal events in the novel based on qualitative approaches and content analysis, arguing that Karunatilaka portrayed the characters in an in-between state and thereby facilitated the capture of the struggles encountered by those individuals in the process of existential crises, particularly during a transitional period in their lives. Wijewardene (2024) examined the novel as a queer reimagining of Sri Lanka's civil war in the 1980s through the lens of dysfunctional objects. The analysis centered on how broken cameras, blurry photographs, and repurposed military/sports equipment symbolize queer marginalization and challenge dominant war narratives. Nazki (2025) examined the evolution of Maali Almeida from nihilism at the opening of the novel to hope posthumously while exploring how the narrative structure and symbolic expressions echo with such themes as truth, redemption, and final reconciliation.

Second, some research scrutinized the social issues reflected in the novel, such as human rights, traumatic war experience, and violence. Sharma and Tripathi (2023) critically probed into the novel through the lens of human rights, particularly focusing on the symbolic representations in the novel. They argued that the novel has penetrated beyond the legal, judicial, and political arenas, and it has become a cultural medium for promoting human rights discourse. Sangwan (2023) investigated the ways Karunatilaka used to construct a personal and collective narrative of trauma based on Maali Almeida's traumatic experiences. Saha and Sarbadhikary (2024) studied how the mythic and magic realist elements incorporated into the novel bring out multiple forms of the concept of national imaginary and further analyzed the traumatic experiences endured by Maali Almeida. Kuriakose and Kumar (2024) explored how violence was presented by Karunatilaka in the novel in light of theories of violence proposed by Hannah Arendt and Arjun Appadurais.

A search of the research on the reception of this novel turns out in vain, despite Jayasuriya and Karunanayake (2025) investigated the global circulation of Sri Lankan literature in general, paying little attention to *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Despite the novel having won the 2022 Booker Prize and swiftly gaining considerable visibility in the international literary arena, the relevant academic inquiry has primarily centered on its postcolonial narrative strategies and ethical politics, leaving the reception of the novel underexplored. Addressing this gap would help us construct a fuller cross-cultural reception profile of the novel and the nuances shaping the reception of English readers. Therefore, this study offers a quantitative and qualitative assessment of reader reviews, offering valuable insights for the international promotion of Sri Lankan literature as well as other forms of peripheral literature.

### 3. Data and Research Methods

#### 3.1. Data Collection

Anglophone world generally refers to countries where English is a dominant or

official language, represented by United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc. In this study, the primary unit of analysis remains the English language community rather than nationality or residency. The English-language reader reviews are aggregated from major, globally accessible book-review platforms. The data for this research comprises the online reviews on *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* collected from Amazon and Goodreads. Both platforms allow readers to rate and review the books they have read, enabling them to share their reading experiences and express opinions freely. The two platforms adopt a five-star rating system, with five being the maximum score. All the reviews collected are to be built into a corpus for further analysis. The date for collecting is June 10, 2025. See **Table 1** for an overview of the review data.

**Table 1.** Rating overview.

Platform	Rating scores	Rating counts	Reviews
Amazon	4.4 (5)	923	79
Goodreads	3.91 (5)	54,245	7183

As **Table 1** suggests, the novel has a relatively high average rating of 4.4 out of 5, based on a total of 923 ratings on Amazon. However, there are only 79 reviews submitted by readers, which is relatively scarce compared with Goodreads. In contrast, the average rating on Goodreads is 3.91 out of 5, significantly lower than that of Amazon. This may be a result of a much broader reader engagement, with 54,245 readers' ratings and 7183 reviews. This sharp discrepancy not only reflects differences in user demographics and platform orientations but also objectively indicates that Goodreads offers a richer database for further scrutinizing diverse reader responses. Therefore, the large quantity of Goodreads reviews on the novel makes it a particularly valuable venue for conducting a case study on reader reception, providing insight into how readers around the world interpret and emotionally engage with the novel. Despite this, it should be noted that the data from Amazon will not be wholly ignored in this research.

**Table 2** highlights the differences in star rating distributions between Amazon and Goodreads for *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, revealing contrasting patterns of reader reception. Five stars represent the highest score, while 0 indicates the lowest score. On Amazon, the novel enjoys overwhelmingly positive feedback, with 68% of readers giving it five stars and 18% awarding four stars, for a total of 86% of readers rating it positively. There are only a few negative ratings, with only 3% giving one star. In contrast, Goodreads displays a much more varied distribution attributed to broader reader engagement. 31% of readers gave it five stars, and 40% awarded it four stars. A notable 22% rated it with three stars, and 6% with two stars. This suggests a broader scope of reader responses on Goodreads, possibly because of its book-sharing and book-reviewing orientation, which can attract larger and more diverse users worldwide. The Goodreads' detailed figure breakdown reflects that while 71% of readers appreciated the novel, a significant

portion interacted with it more critically. This diverse reception data further underscores the opinion above that Goodreads serves as a rich source for analyzing reader response and reception of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*.

**Table 2.** Rating distribution.

Platform	Rating				
	1	2	3	4	5
Amazon	27	19	83	166	628
	3%	2%	9%	18%	68%
Goodreads	1095	3255	11,710	21,580	16,605
	2%	6%	22%	40%	31%

Since Goodreads is a global reading community, the reviews are posted in various languages. The multilingual feature of the reviews for *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* underscores the novel's worldwide reach and cultural resonance. The majority of the reviews are written in English (6237), which occupies approximately 87% of all reviews. A substantial number of reviews have also been posted in other languages. Notably, reviews in Italian (115), Dutch (82), German (57), Spanish (55), Portuguese (45), and French (16), suggesting the novel's compellingly broad engagement with European readers. Apart from this, there are a few reviews written in Bengali, Chinese, Sinhala, and Vietnamese etc.

### 3.2. Data Cleaning

Considering English is the dominant language of readers' reviews on Goodreads and the book itself is written in English, the author decides to only select English reviews for further investigation. This high proportion guarantees a substantial and representative database, which is sufficient to capture a wide range of reader perception and reception. Among 6237 English reviews, some of which only contain star ratings in text, for example, two stars, without any further opinions. In addition, some reviews only contain emojis, or they are nonsensical. Reviews of these types, therefore, are removed after careful reading. After filtering, 6194 English reviews are chosen for further investigation.

### 3.3. Research Methods

To capture both the breadth and depth of reader reception of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the present study adopts a two-layered analytical framework. At the coarse-grained level, the analysis first maps the diachronic evolution of reader reviews and examines the distribution of evaluative polarity. This macro analysis provides a quantitative overview of how the novel has been received in the Anglophone world across different time periods. On this basis, the study then proceeds to a fine-grained penetration into representative readers' comments. This micro analysis seeks to uncover the concrete rationales behind the positive

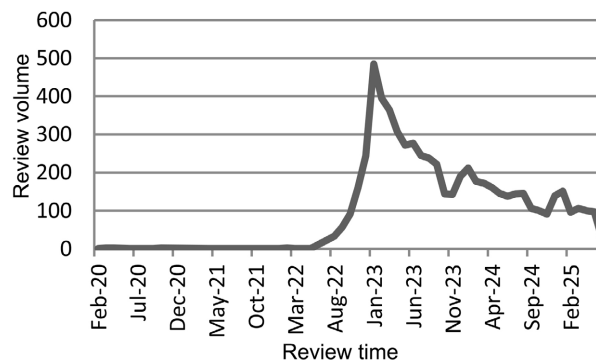
and negative reviews by extracting and categorizing the specific points that readers commend or criticize. The integration of the coarse-grained and fine-grained analysis, hence, ensures a comprehensive profile of the novel's reception.

This study investigates the reception in the Anglophone world via English-language online reviews drawn from global platforms, thereby excluding responses in other languages. As a result, the corpus is unavoidably susceptible to platform bias. Despite these limitations, the selected review platforms remain representative of global English-language readership and thus provide a meaningful observation point into patterns of reader reception.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Diachronic Evolution of Review Volume

On August 4, 2022, the paperback version of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* was published in the UK by Sort of Books, a small independent London publisher. However, before this paperback version, an earlier one was published in India in 2020, titled *Chats with the Dead*, by Penguin Random House India. This explains why the earliest review on Goodreads appeared on 24 February 2020. **Figure 1** shows the diachronic evolution of the volume of the reviews published on Goodreads from February 2020 to June 2025.



**Figure 1.** Diachronic evolution of review volume (2020-2025).

The temporal distribution and evolution of review volume from February 2020 to June 2025 reveal a striking correlation between literary prize recognition and novel sales. Three distinct phases can be observed in **Figure 1**. The first phase is a long pre-award period between February 2020 and July 2022, with sporadic reviews published. The second is a sharp surge phase of reviews following the Booker Prize win in August 2022, lasting until January 2023. The third is a gradual decline phase featuring the cold anticipation after winning the prize since February 2023. This is not exclusive to *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*; many award-winning novels in the world enter a period of more or less obscurity after the period of being in full swing.

During the two-and-a-half-year period before the announcement of Booker Prize, the novel only attracted a few readers' reviews. Monthly review counts

ranged from 1 to 2, with several months having no reviews at all. This period indicates that the novel, though available, had a minimal reach and impact. It reveals that the story had not yet entered the mainstream English literary market. This phenomenon is typical of many literary pieces that have yet to receive prominent or influential literary recognition.

After the Booker Prize was announced in 2022, it instantly triggered a dramatic and rapid surge in book sales and reader engagement. Monthly review volume rose from 1 in May 2022 to 33 in August, a period marked by fast and exponential growth. In the subsequent months, the number of reviews increased to 57 in September, 91 in October, 160 in November, and 244 in December 2022, culminating in a peak of 485 reviews in January 2023, which is the highest monthly figure in the entire review data. This six-month-long, award-winning phase reflects that the novel gained maximum visibility and attracted cultural resonance worldwide. The timing and scale of the abrupt increase unveil a cause-and-effect relationship, with the Booker Prize functioning as a critical and even transformative event that substantially expanded the novel's reach, stimulated reader response, and encouraged wide-scale dialogues and interactions in both public and academic fields.

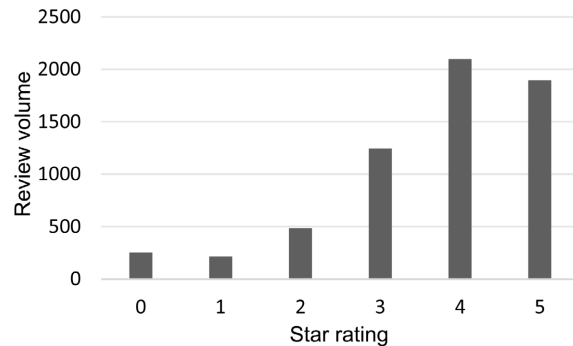
Beginning in February 2023, the novel entered the post-award phase, marked by a gradual decline in readers' reviews. While monthly reviews remained relatively high in the first quarter, for example, 395 in February, 364 in March, and 307 in April, a noticeable downward trend soon followed and became visible. By the end of 2023, the volume had sharply declined to between 143 and 190 reviews per month, and continued to drop steadily throughout 2024. By mid-2025, the number of reviews had plunged below 100, registering only 27 in June 2025. It is estimated that this downward trend will remain in the coming years. This long, extended phase reflects that the substantial public interest has apparently faded following a high-profile literary award. Nonetheless, the reader engagement remains stronger than the pre-award period, indicating a stable readership base and continued, though less intense, presence in the literature market.

Based on the above analysis, the diachronic changes in the number of readers' reviews on *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* over the five years demonstrate the impact of literary prizes on book consumption and reading. The data support a three-phase model: an initial stage of obscurity, a burst of attention following the Booker Prize win, and a declining phase after the prize-winning. It underscores the pervasive impact of the Booker Prize as a catalyst for visibility, reader engagement, and lasting cultural significance.

## 4.2. Rating Distribution and Sentiment Tendency

**Figure 2** shows the overall distribution of ratings on *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It is found that the novel is generally well-received among English readers worldwide, with the vast majority appreciating it. Around 4000 readers gave positive ratings (rating 4 and 5 stars); this group accounts for 65%. In contrast, 467 readers rated from 0 to 2 stars, accounting for 15% of all. These readers are considered dissatisfied with the novel, varying in degree. In between is the 3-star

rating, which suggests the readers are generally neutral in their reviews. A total of 1245 readers rated three stars, accounting for 20%.



**Figure 2.** Rating distribution.

In addition, 252 readers rated the novel zero star, indicating that they are highly dissatisfied with the novel. This group accounts for 4%, which is relatively low. It reflects only a small number of readers who found the book very disappointing, frustrating or couldn't meet any of their expectations. It should be noted that in some rating systems, a 0-star rating may also suggest a default or unintentional submission. The number of 1-star ratings is the fewest among all, totalling 215 and accounting for 3%. The 2-star ratings, with 486 counts, account for 8% among all ratings. It reflects a more substantial but still minor group of readers who found themselves disappointed with the novel. The 0 - 2 star rating group is likely to consist of readers who deemed the novel highly unsatisfactory, likely criticizing the novel in terms of its character portrayal, plot development, pacing, or writing style. The 3-star ratings consist of a large and significant group. With 1245 ratings, these readers generally found the novel average, neither engaging enough to deserve praise nor flawed enough to be denied.

With 2098 ratings, 4 stars is the most frequently rated score. It indicates that a considerable number of readers thought the novel very compelling and worth reading. There are 1897 counts of 5-star ratings, accounting for 31%. This group extends the strong support for the novel. It is likely for them to find the story very powerful, emotionally resonant, or brilliantly designed and written. Their high rating suggests the book not only meets but exceeds their reading expectations. This group is significant to the reception and promotion of the novel, because their recommendation in reviews is a way of word-of-mouth promotion, which would influence other potential readers and thus stimulate sales.

## 5. Further Exploration

This section conducts a coarse-grained and fine-grained analysis of reader comments on *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* through opinion mining, aiming to uncover the specific rationales behind both positive and negative evaluations. By systematically identifying and categorizing readers' viewpoints, the analysis seeks

to reveal not only what aspects of the novel resonate positively with readers but also which elements trigger dissatisfaction, thereby offering a nuanced picture of the novel's reception in the global literary marketplace.

### 5.1. Coarse-Grained Lexical Analysis

To further investigate readers' opinions on the novel, two corpora are established (see **Table 3**), respectively comprised of reviews of 0 - 2 star ratings and 4 - 5 star ratings. Drawing on corpus linguistics, the following discussions focus on two levels: lexical and textual. To begin with, high-frequency words carrying positive or negative sentiment in each corpus will be extracted as the observation points. Driven by the lexical analysis, I will turn to the context of these reviews to further analyze the frequently mentioned opinions among readers, aiming to gain insight into the factors contributing to the reception or rejection of the novel. The corpus tool used in this research is Antconc (version 4.3.1).

**Table 3.** General description of the corpus.

Name	Type	Token
Positive comment corpus	17,845	447,759
Negative comment corpus	6596	68,864

The "Word" function in Antconc can count all the words in the corpus and provide an ordered list immediately after analysis. It allows researchers to know which words are the most frequent ones in a corpus. It is noted that the list usually contains function words or non-content words, such as "the" "a" "and" "of" "that", etc. Therefore, it's necessary to add stop words to filter them out. **Table 4** shows the list of high-frequency words that usually indicate positive sentiment.

**Table 4.** High-frequency words indicating positive sentiment.

No.	Word	Freq	No.	Word	Freq	No.	Word	Freq
1	love(d)	1354	11	recommend	288	21	powerful	142
2	well	840	12	worth	286	22	wonderful	129
3	good	686	13	unique	263	23	engaging	124
4	beautiful(ly)	562	14	humour	245	24	fantastic	122
5	interesting	539	15	liked	215	25	creative	115
6	great	483	16	brilliant	205	26	excellent	114
7	enjoyed	468	17	glad	189	27	compelling	112
8	magical	357	18	amazing	167	28	favorite	100
9	best	336	19	fascinating	150			
10	funny	304	20	important	147			

The list of high-frequency words found in the positive reviews of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* reveals how deeply the novel resonated and echoed with readers. The most frequent word is “love(d)”, appearing over 1300 times, which demonstrates the strong affective connections readers felt with the novel. It is closely followed by “well” (840 times) and “good” (686 times). It’s a little surprising to find “beautiful(ly)” ranks high on the list, appearing 562 times. Some of the readers pointed out that the writing style was beautiful. A total of 539 readers mentioned in their reviews that the novel is riveting to them, and 468 readers expressed that they enjoyed reading the novel, indicating widespread satisfaction. Many readers described the novel as “magical” (357 times) and “brilliant” (205 times), suggesting readers’ appreciation for the lyrical or imaginative element of the novel. Other frequent words such as “funny” (304 times), “unique” (263 times), and “humour” (245 times) indicate that the readers were attracted by the novel’s wit and captivating narration, despite its serious themes. Additionally, “powerful” (142 times) reflects the depth of thematic exploration. Two hundred eighty-six readers thought the novel was worth reading, and 288 readers would like to recommend it to others. Overall, these lexical choices in the reviews point to a pleasant reading experience, which is not only emotionally engaging but also intellectually stimulating.

The list of high-frequency words found in the positive reviews of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* reveals how deeply the novel resonated and echoed with readers. The most frequent word is “love(d)”, appearing over 1300 times, which demonstrates the strong affective connections readers felt with the novel. It is closely followed by “well” (840 times) and “good” (686 times). It’s a little surprising to find “beautiful(ly)” ranks high on the list, appearing 562 times. Some of the readers point out that the writing style of Shehan Karunatilaka is beautiful. 539 readers mention in their reviews that the novel is riveting to them, and 468 readers express that they are enjoying reading the novel, indicating widespread satisfaction. Many readers describe the novel as “magical” (357 times) and “brilliant” (205 times), suggesting readers’ appreciation for the lyrical or imaginative element of the novel. Other frequent words such as “funny” (304 times), “unique” (263 times), and “humour” (245 times) indicate that the readers were attracted by the novel’s wit and captivating narration, despite its serious themes. Additionally, “powerful” (142 times) reflects the depth of thematic exploration. Two hundred eighty-six readers think the novel is worth reading, and 288 readers would like to recommend it to others. Overall, these lexical choices in the reviews point to a pleasant reading experience, which is not only emotionally engaging but also intellectually stimulating.

**Table 5** shows the list of high-frequency words that usually indicate negative sentiment. The most frequent word that appeared in the reviews is “DNF” (abbreviation for “did not finish”), appearing 164 times in total. It indicates that a high number of readers were unable or unwilling to complete reading the novel. Most of them stop reading at around 10% to 30% of the novel. Generally, DNF readers wouldn’t give a positive rating due to their bad reading experience. Some readers

found the novel disengaging because it did not spark joy or was too confusing to continue. The second top-ranking word is “confus\*”, which includes words confuse, confused, confusing, and confusion. 153 readers complained that the novel was confusing to them. Consequently, lots of readers got lost while reading, as exemplified by “lost” appearing 58 times. The third and fourth most frequent words are “hard” (126 times) and “difficult” (67 times), which suggest the readers found the novel difficult to understand or follow. A similar response can be further detected in words like “complicated” (24 times) and “complex” (17 times). Words revealing unpleasant reading experience include “bad” (49 times), “struggle(d)” (49 times), “boring/bored” (47 times), and tedious (15 times). Words suggesting negative emotional responses include “disappoint(ed/ing)” (47 times), “hate(d)” (33 times), “sad(ly)” (25 times), and “challenging” (14 times). Readers were likely to express criticism on the structure, tone, pace, plot, or characters of the novel by using words such as “repetitive” (37 times), “disjointed” (17 times), “pointless” (21 times), “dragged” (19 times), “weird” (13 times), and “messy” (10 times) in their reviews.

**Table 5.** High-frequency words indicating negative sentiment.

No.	Words	Freq	No.	Words	Freq	No.	Words	Freq
1	DNF	164	11	hate(d)	33	21	complex	17
2	confus(e/ed/ing/ion)	153	12	slow	28	22	disjointed	17
3	hard	126	13	dark	27	23	impossible	16
4	difficult	67	14	slog	27	24	stuck	15
5	lost	58	15	sad(ly)	25	25	tedious	15
6	bad	49	16	complicated	24	26	challenging	14
7	struggle(d)	49	17	problem	23	27	weird	13
8	boring/bored	47	18	pointless	21	28	awful	12
9	disappoint(ed/ing)	47	19	dragged	19	29	messy	10
10	repetitive	37	20	lack	19	30	poor	10
						31	strange	10

A frequent opinion can be mined centering on the adverb “really”, which suggests the intense feelings of readers. As **Table 5** indicates, some readers claimed that they really wanted to love or like the novel, but unfortunately, weren’t able to for various reasons. As for the specific reasons, these will be investigated in detail later when analyzing readers’ comments.

## 5.2. Fine-Grained Textual Analysis

This section conducts a fine-grained analysis of reader comments on *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* through opinion mining, seeking to uncover the concrete rationales behind readers’ praise and criticism.

### 5.2.1. Factors Shaping Readers' Reception in Positive Reviews

Four recurrent viewpoints in positive reviews can be extracted as follows. First, many readers note that this novel helps them gain insight into the history, culture, and politics of Sri Lanka, thereby enhancing their understanding of Sri Lanka. Second, readers praise the author's creative writing style and the fantastic character portrayal. Third, the novel teems with dark humor, which makes the reading experience enjoyable.

#### 1) Insight-gaining into Sri Lankan history, culture, and politics

The story in the novel takes place during Sri Lanka's brutal civil war, which raged there during the late 1980s and 1990s. This is considered the most violent period in the history after Sri Lanka's independence. Through Maali's posthumous journey of investigating his death, readers can witness the violent chaos in Sri Lanka, including political unrest, military crimes, rebel violence, and conflicts among ethnic groups. Several readers express in their reviews that reading this novel helps them know about the history of Sri Lanka. The following are some representative comments taken from readers' reviews.

Review 1: Incredibly written novel and a worthy Booker prize winner! A fascinating and horrifying insight into the history and war in Sri Lanka, which is an area of history I knew nothing about before. The world building was a little tricky for me initially (hence four stars) but I fell in love with the characters and the story by the end. Would definitely recommend. (Buttler, 2024)

Review 2: This was good. A great insight into Sri Lankan politics and culture. Its humor in places and heartbreaking in others. It is well written and the narrative and characters are well developed, despite the fact that it is not overlong. (Rosser, 2022)

As Jayasuriya and Karunanayake (2025, p. 4) point out, the Anglophone Sri Lankan writers, including Karunatilaka, often write with this double responsibility: "While tethering their work to Sri Lankan politics, people, history, and culture, they keep both domestic and global audiences in mind." The novel not only helps international readers gain more knowledge about Sri Lanka, but also engages Sri Lankans themselves to reflect on the country's past. Hannadige (2024) claimed that this novel meant so much to her since she is a Sri Lankan; she saw her city reflected in the novel, and the author's exploration of these topics holds a mirror to the past that they are so eager to move on from but find themselves unable to because there can be no progress without justice. Instead of offering a chronology of historical events, the author puts together the complete picture from Maali's memories, ghosts' narrations, and snippets of speech by the living: from ethnic enmity to religious violence, from political scams to the agony of ordinary people. All those scattered recollections paint a comprehensive picture of a war. By reflecting the period through one single life, the novel makes grand historical narratives tangible and familiar, and rescues them from historical didacticism.

#### 2) Creative writing and fantastic character portrayal

The writing quality and technique play an essential role in the reception among

readers. In this novel, Karunatilaka adeptly blends a variety of genres, including magic realism, political satire, thriller, and historical fiction. This hybridity of genre, to some degree, enables the writing to stand out as unconventional and innovative to the readers. The character portrayal in the novel is one of the aspects deserving some attention. Karunatilaka has created a gallery of rich, complex, and often symbolically charged characters who not only mirror personal struggles but also the broader socio-political and even spiritual crises of contemporary Sri Lanka in the late 20th century. Maali is portrayed as a flawed but heroic protagonist, as being a gay, atheist, gambler, and at the same time, a war photographer. He is almost entirely marginal and queer to every identity group in Sri Lankan society. Maali's secret boyfriend, DD, is a gentle and cautious gay man. He represents the struggle of sexuality, loyalty, and ideology woven in Sri Lanka. Jaki, Maali's best friend and DD's former girlfriend, is intelligent, emotionally resilient, and politically active. Some readers highly praised these points, as shown in the following comments.

Review 3: Karunatilaka's writing is witty, creative, and poignant, and it is remarkably devoid of bombastic language. It's still a great novel, even though the idea of queerness that emerged in the protagonist's relationships may or may not have helped it win the Booker Prize! (Al-Jassim, 2024)

Review 4: The writing and dialogue is snappy and witty—and therefore alternatively at times quite funny and powerful, [...]. I found the characters quite compelling, particularly DD, Jaki, and Stanley, and how Maali's personality shines in the flashback scenes and in the negatives of his absence in the present non-afterlife world. Just so engaging and thought-provoking. Litfic fantasy hits the spot so much. (Artrip, 2024)

In addition, some readers think highly of the suspense created by the author. Flores-Mejia (2024) pointed out that the novel kept the readers hooked until the end of the story to find out who exactly killed Maali. Heni (2023) noted that she liked the B-plot weaved in the novel about who the real murderer was and where the bad people were as it kept her guessing and awake.

### 3) Strong humor and satire

The novel is written from the strange and unexpected perspective of Maali's "afterlife", that is, a "ghost" perspective. It is more ridiculous that the afterlife of the character is run by some civil servants with paper forms and long queues. In this way, the humorous tone is set for the whole story. Meanwhile, he uses biting sarcasm throughout the novel to create a strong sense of dark humor. For instance, when Maali's soul was searching for the killer, he mocked the bureaucratic inefficiency of the afterlife and claimed it was worse than the government he knew when he was alive. The following are some comments from the readers.

Review 5: Anyway, if your idea of coping with mortality is cracking jokes... this may be the book for you. Maali brings top-notch sarcastic humor and a promise that "the universe does not care what you do with your meat suit." Karunatilaka has a snappy and satirical writing style that spares no one from

critique. (Becca, 2023)

Review 6: A distinctive element of this book would be the dark humor and satirical prose adopted by Karunatilaka. Sharp, witty, and bold comments were made against all the parties (including the UN and USA) involved in the civil war, as well as the corrupted state of Sri Lanka (P.S. pages 22 to 23 brilliantly summarised the Sri Lankan tragedy in a LOL manner!). (Jian, 2022)

Humor and satire single out the novel stylistically. While narrating the brutality of Sri Lanka's civil conflicts, such as the piles of corpses, missing heads, and numerous bodies, the author offsets the horror and ghastliness with dark and satirical commentary, thereby engaging readers to confront the appalling violence through intense irony instead of solemnity. The satirical tone also appears in Maali's reflections on the politics, bureaucracy, and corruption, which reinforces the absurdity of systemic dysfunction. Such humor can simultaneously relieve the heaviness of the subject matter and underpin its critique, making the story more engaging for some readers.

Besides the above recurring opinions of the strengths found in the readers' reviews, another point deserves to be mentioned, that is, the second-person perspective of narration. The novel opens with "You wake up with the answer to the question that everyone asks." (Karunatilaka, 2022: p. 1), later unfolding entirely in the second person perspective. Buck (2024) commented: "Surreal, witty, and just so chillingly beautiful—this book is unlike anything I've read before in the best way. The use of second-person pov is rarely done, and is rarely done SO WELL".

The second-person perspective enables the author to penetrate deeply "into the ethical relationship between individuals and society, the moral dilemmas of war, the preservation and disclosure of historical memory", which can immerse the readers "in Almeida's stream of consciousness and mental activity" (Yuan & Zhuo, 2024: p. 910). Furthermore, it compels the readers to step into Maali's shoes, experiencing what he is experiencing, such as his disorientation, his urgency to discover the truth, and even his isolation as a gay man in a conservative society. This forced identification deepens the emotional engagement and blurs the line between the readers and characters. Saha and Sarbadhikary (2024: p. 5) argued that by retaining the voice of the dead character, and also using a second-person narrative style, it implicates the reader within the scheme of events and leaves open a possibility of overcoming trauma through a new understanding of the social and political institutions. While the second-person perspective can heighten immediacy and ethical engagement, its very insistence also produces resistance for some readers, yielding a mixed reception that aligns with the criticisms detailed in 5.2.2.

### 5.2.2. Factors Shaping Readers' Reception in Negative Reviews

Based on the analysis of the corpus comprised of 0 - 2 star comments, the readers' recurring criticisms are identified in four aspects. First, there are abrupt shifts in

time and heavy use of dialogue in the novel, which makes it hard for readers to follow and proceed. Second, there are too many characters appearing in the novel, and the character development is poor. Third, the novel is saturated with brutality and violence, posing psychological and physical challenges to the readers. Fourth, a good comprehension of the novel requires some background knowledge in Sri Lanka's history and politics.

#### 1) Abrupt shifts in time and heavy use of dialogue

While unfolding Maali's story, Karunatilaka does not follow chronological order. Instead, he jumps frequently in time as he oscillates between Maali being alive and his ghostly presence. In the novel, Maali flashes back to different phases of the Sri Lanka civil war, and his memories unfortunately return in fragments due to the disruption of linear memory caused by trauma. Furthermore, there are no clear markers between the past and present, and a consistent chapter structure that displays timelines. The following are some negative comments on this.

Review 7: When I started reading this book I was expecting to really enjoy it. It reminded me a bit of Elif Shafak's "Ten minutes, 30 seconds in this strange world", which I thought was very good. However, I soon found the writing style disjointed and the heavy use of dialogue affected the flow of the story for me. (Ruth, 2022)

Review 8: The plot dragged for a good chunk of it and then picked up the pace a lot towards the end [...] but it was so unnecessary leaving the reader to meander through the complicated second person and unexplained jumps in time, spirits, animals. (Alford, 2025)

Review 9: It took a bit to get going, but I thought the underworld of Sri Lanka and the complexity of the civil war (in many ways, still ongoing) was really interesting [...]. Nevertheless, parts of the story are hard to understand because Maali is constantly jumping from one place to another, one time to another, as you try to unravel why he died and at whose hands. (Sheshadri, 2023)

The abrupt shifts in time might be done by Karunatilaka as a deliberate intention of forming a stylistic highlight, as it echoes with the themes of the afterlife, trauma, and disorientation. However, it can also confuse readers who expect to read a well-organized and chronological narrative.

#### 2) Too many characters and poor character development

Karunatilaka intends to portray a country at war with itself by weaving a complex web of characters composed of people from all walks of life. There are government officials, army and police officers, rebels, activists, journalists, ordinary citizens, spirits of the dead, etc. Many of these characters carry political or cultural allegories. However, they often appear and disappear without clear transitions, and some of them do not have full names. The author does not provide a character list, making it hard for readers to keep track of the characters. The following are some complaints in readers' comments.

Review 10: The author throws 90+ poorly developed characters at the reader—halfway through I was musing that it’s almost perverse how many new names the author briefly introduces, vanishes, then reintroduces some chapters later! Despite this, he fails to develop a single one enough for the reader to develop any empathy towards. (Purushottam, 2023)

Review 11: I started reading this book because of its popularity and reviews. What can I say...It was totally disappointing. The humor within the book, that was most praised, was practically non-existent, the characters were poorly build, with 0 development and the story was quite plain and repetitive. I can say that only ~15 pages got me “hooked”. (Marghescu, 2025)

### 3) Too much brutality and violence

Since the novel is set in Sri Lanka’s civil war period, the depiction of brutal war scenes is unavoidable. Karunatilaka portrays floating corpses in lakes and rivers, dumped bodies in mass graves, and scenes of bombing, executions, and torture. Additionally, Maali is a war photographer; his job naturally involves documenting death, crimes, and destruction. His war photos are described in great vivid and often grotesque detail. The bloody scenes and violence bring challenges to readers who are sensitive to them or not prepared for the novel’s intense content. Tina (2024) noted that she “couldn’t get through the violence and didn’t find it interesting enough to try so she gave up after the third chapter or so. To some readers, the degree of violence depicted in the novel is simply unbearable. For example,

Review 12: It also uses a glib, macabre, satirical humour, describing the horrors of war in gory detail but in such a flippant way that it felt bordering on disrespectful to me. The story constantly juxtaposes lusty images of penises with confronting images of torture and death in a way that I found disturbing and just plain weird. (Rachel, 2024)

Review 13: It is brutal. Gruesome. And I don’t need to read about man’s ability to chop up other humans. I get how cruel people can be. I remember once reading Thoreau saying he did not need to read a newspaper because he already knows how cruel humans can be or something to that effect. If you want all the gory details of killing, this is the book for you. (Stern, 2022)

### 4) Background knowledge as a prerequisite for comprehension

For readers unfamiliar with the historical and political context of Sri Lanka, this novel is quite challenging. Some readers are discouraged from reading due to the complex historical and political events. Georgia (2024) criticized the book for being too difficult for her to read, “I didn’t understand any of the history of the wars it was referencing, despite googling and trying to learn some background”. Besides, too many new words can also hinder readers from enjoying the reading process. For instance,

Review 14: Too many characters and keeps jumping from storyline to storyline. Has too many Sinhala words, not sure if a non Sri Lankan will understand. My friend mentioned that the book must be more like war propaganda

biased towards tigers to have won an international award, Ditto! (Kora, 2023)  
 Review 15: I will have to stop reading books just because they won an award. Difficult, full of events and names I couldn't remember or relay. Too many words I don't understand nor could find in the dictionary. The way dialogs are written made the book even more confusing and difficult for me. I tried but I couldn't even read 1/3 of it. (Kladakis, 2022)

In terms of the use of the second-person perspective, some readers criticized it. Ana (2024) argued, "the second person POV became tiresome very quickly and caused a disconnect with the main character". RySack (2023) pointed out that the second-person perspective was a major distraction throughout his reading process.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, the above analysis suggests that despite some critical voices, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* has been, on the whole, well received among English readers worldwide. While individual opinions inevitably vary, the overall reception of the novel can be characterized as widely favorable, which indicates the novel's charm resonates with a diverse readership. However, evaluating the reception of a novel is more than judging from the apparent review volume. What's more important is to unearth the underlying factors that contribute to the good or bad reception of a novel.

On the one hand, the positive reviews tend to highlight a few artistic traits of the novel. Some readers praised the book for offering insights into the history, culture, and politics of Sri Lanka. Some readers highlighted that the author's creative blending of various genres, fantastic character portrayal, and plot development made the novel a compelling read. Despite its serious subject matter, the novel's strong humor and satire were praised by readers for offsetting the heaviness of violence and politics and rendering them more compelling to engage with.

On the other hand, the negative reviews tend to converge on a few recurrent concerns. Some readers complained that the abrupt time shifts and heavy use of dialogue sometimes make them get lost and confused. Some readers found it difficult to distinguish the characters due to the large number of characters, and the character development is relatively weak. Some readers criticized the novel for being too violent and bloody. Still, others found the novel challenging to follow without prior knowledge of the history and politics of Sri Lanka, which made it harder to understand. These criticisms, however, do not impact the overall positive reception of the novel but highlight the novel's capacity to stimulate meaningful dialogues among the readers.

As the reception suggests, the novel's very capacity to elicit both appreciation and criticism secures its place as a vital piece in contemporary world literature. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* not only enriches contemporary world literature by offering a Sri Lankan perspective but also exemplifies how Sri Lankan literature is received in the world. The reception thus testifies to its enduring lit-

erary significance as a text that stimulates reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement across diverse readerships. By winning a prestigious literary award, the novel has not only encouraged wider reading and critical engagement but also contributed to the broader dissemination of Sri Lankan literature worldwide.

While this study focuses on *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, its findings resonate more widely with all prize-winning postcolonial literature. The analysis shows how major literary prize acts as accelerators of visibility, rapidly reshaping the global readership. It highlights that the reception of postcolonial prize-winners is co-produced by literary prestige, creative writing, and reader interaction, offering transferable insights for future comparative reception studies.

### Funding

This work was supported by the Research Center for China-Sri Lanka Cultural Exchange and Economic Development of Huanggang Normal University, under the project “Reader Reception of Shehan Karunatilaka’s Booker Prize-winning Work” (grant#202325204).

### Notes on Contributor

Jie Li is associate professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Huanggang Normal University, China.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### References

- Alford, M. (2025). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5295782673>
- Al-Jassim, E. M. (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/7068871728>
- Ana (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6997329659>
- Artrip, A. (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/7160995053>
- Becca, B. (2023). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5121751572>
- Buck, A. (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6237109907>
- Buttler, L. (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6900646247>
- Flores-Mejia, J. (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6410563696>
- Georgia (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6402065391>
- Hannadige, D. (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.

- <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6373544998>
- Heni (2023). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5058260180>
- Jayasuriya, M., & Halpé, A. (2012). Contestation, Marginality, and (Trans)Nationalism: Considering Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature. *South Asian Review*, 33, 17-28.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2012.11932893>
- Jayasuriya, M., & Karunanayake, D. (2025). Mapping Global Sri Lankan Literature and Culture. *South Asian Review*, 46, 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2025.2478701>
- Jian, K. (2022). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4875622354>
- Karunanayake, D. (2025). On Journalists Becoming Detectives and Writers Becoming Truth-Seekers—A Chat with Shehan Karunatilaka. *South Asian Review*, 46, 212-223.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2025.2462373>
- Karunatilaka, S. (2022). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Sort of Books.
- Kladakis, N. (2022). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5140272373>
- Kora, H. (2023). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5195886654>
- Kuriakose, S. C. & Kumar, J. (2024). An Analysis of the Seven Moons of Maali Almeida in the Light of Theories of Violence by Hannah Arendt and Arjun Appadurai. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 35, 81-94.
- Marghescu, A. (2025). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5584234941>
- Mathew, R. (2024). The Mayhem of In Between Existence: Decoding Transitional Liminality in The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida. *IIS University Journal of Arts*, 13, 78-92.
- Nazki, S. H. (2025). Journey from Nihilism to Hope: A Study of the Seven Moons of Maali Almeida. *International Journal of Applied and Scientific Research*, 3, 143-158.  
<https://doi.org/10.59890/ijasr.v3i3.477>
- Purushottam, A. (2023). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5053033513>
- Rachel (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6258261840>
- Rosser, K. (2022). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5172253081>
- Ruth. (2022). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6028866072>
- RySack (2023). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads.  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5329546988>
- Saha, A & Sarbadhikary, M. G. (2024). Myth, Mystery, and Murder: Trauma and Resistance in the Seven Moons of Maali Almeida. *Critical South Asian Studies*, 2, 5-13.  
<https://doi.org/10.33182/csas.v2i1.3255>
- Sangwan, D. N. (2023). Trauma and Resistance in the Seven Moons of Maali Almeida. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*, 5, 142-143.  
<https://doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2023.v5.i1b.223>
- Sharma, N., & Tripathi, P. (2023). Human Rights and Literature: A Study of the Seven Moons of Maali Almeida. *Southeast Asian Review of English*, 60, 171-191.  
<https://doi.org/10.22452/sare.vol60no1.10>

- Sheshadri, R. (2023). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads. <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5191987007>
- Stern, E. (2022). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads. <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/5179818290>
- Tina. (2024). *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Goodreads. <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6379530028>
- Wijewardene, S. (2024). "Chasing Queers with Cameras": Objects, a "Prosthetic Man," and the Impotent Witnessing of War in *the Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. *South Asian Review*, 46, 27-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2024.2380182>
- Yuan, K. & Zhuo, L. (2024). From Brain Text to the Final Text: Karunatilaka's Ethical Consciousness in Constructing Brain Text. *Forum for World Literature Studies*, 16, 901-914.