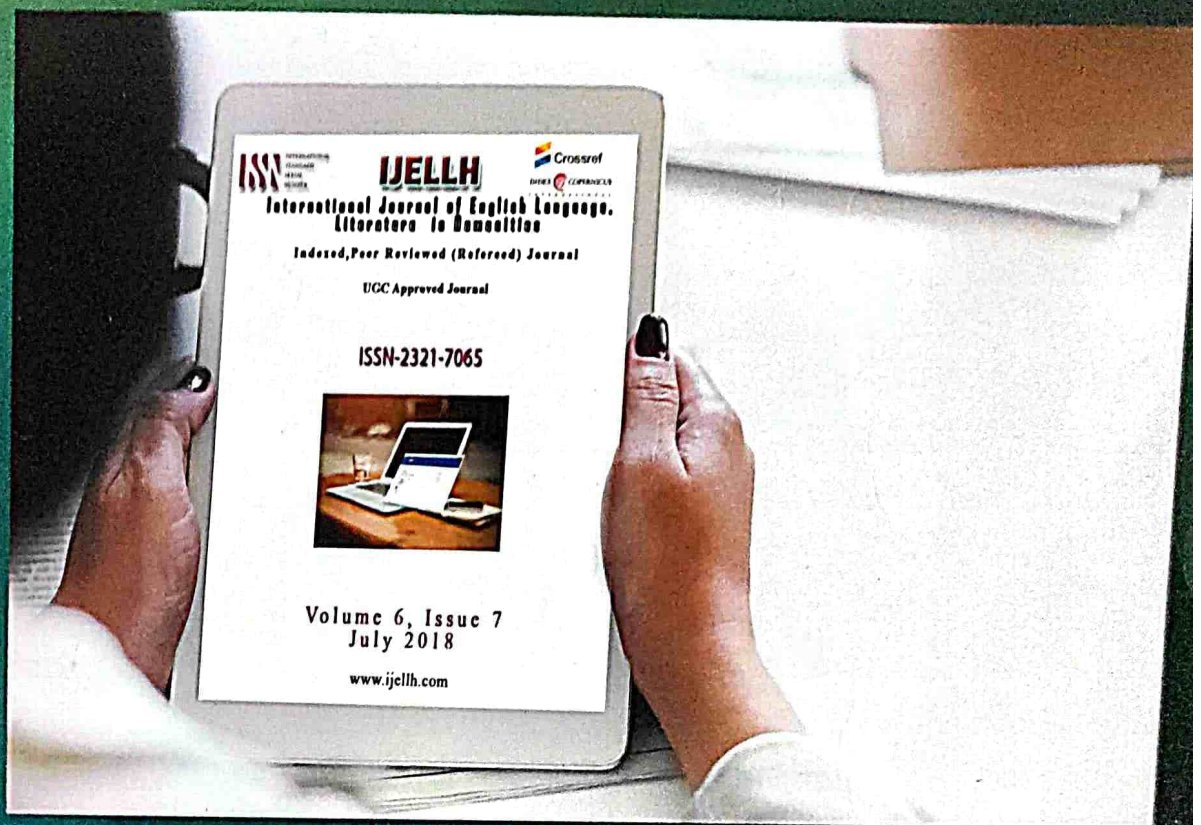


# IJELLH

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE, LITERATURE IN HUMANITIES



Volume 6, Issue 7, July 2018

MONTHLY JOURNAL

An international platform for researchers

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

Crossref

**IJELLH**

INDEX COPERNICUS  
INTERNATIONAL

UGC Approved Journal

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

Volume 6, Issue 7, July 2018

**International Journal of English Language, Literature  
in Humanities**

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## International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

IJELLH (International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities) is peer-reviewed (refereed) open access journal. The journal has been granted an **ISSN: 2321-7065** (International Standard Serial Number).

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Tracing Buddhist Undertones in Syam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*

History of a nation often gets expressed in the literature and writings of the nation. Sri Lanka is an island in the south-eastern coast of India with a population of about 20 million and is separated from the Indian subcontinent by the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait. Sri Lanka is a nation that was swept with three decades of swarming protracted internal conflict. The protracted and sporadic conflicts which developed after the independence of the nation from the British in 1948 gained popularity after the 1983 July riots. Much of the literary writings from Sri Lanka was in the Sinhala language with a considerable amount written in Tamil and in English. Some of the famous writers from Sri Lanka who writes in English are Michael Ondaatje, Christopher Ondaatje, Romesh Ganesekera, Syam Selvadurai, Jean Anandayagam, Rajiva Wijesinha, V.V. Ganeshanathan, Ru Freeman and David Blacker.

Syam Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist living in Toronto. He wrote *Funny Boy* (1994) which won the Books in Canada First Novel Award, and *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998). He currently lives in Toronto. Selvadurai was born in Sri Lanka to a mixed ethnicity with a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father. Troubles of conflicting ethnic groups

form the major crux in his work. Ethnic riots in 1983 forced his family to emigrate to Canada when Selvadurai was nineteen. In 2013, he released his fourth novel, *The Hungry Ghosts*.

*The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) is a novel written in the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil insurgency that was swallowing the land. The novel in itself portrays the kind of demarcation that the two ethnic groups had in the island nation and the hatred that fuelled the civil riots, making it a place unsafe to live in. The novel is in the form of a biography, with the novelist depicting his childhood and the civil unrest that grew around him. The narrator who begins the novel through the eyes of a schoolboy who is looked after by his Sinhalese grandmother gives a detailed description about living through a nation tormented by civil unrest.

The novel can be said to have been written from a Buddhist perspective. It mingles religion with the political scenarios and family circumstances. "Hungry Ghost" is a concept in Buddhism representing human beings as unsatisfied beings after their death. The term "hungry ghost", is the English translation of the term *preta* in Buddhism. The term does not mean the evil spirit of a deceased ancestor. Hungry ghosts, by contrast, are a much more exceptional case, and would only occur in very unfortunate circumstances such as, if a whole family was killed or when a family no longer venerated their ancestors. Hence, the concept becomes an indispensable part of Buddhist ideology.

Religion and politics, peace and violence are the two extremes of the same coin, neither of them mingling with the other- but when mingled bringing about the most terrific outcome that can be found in the entire world. The paper intends to go deeper into the Buddhist ideology that prevailed in the island nation of Sri Lanka better known as the land where Buddhism flourished after it came into being in India. With the rise in popularity of Buddhism, the idea became popular that souls would live in space until reincarnation. In the

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Taoist tradition, it is believed that hungry ghosts can rise from people whose deaths have been violent or unhappy. Both Buddhism and Taoism share the idea that hungry ghosts can emerge from neglect or desertion of ancestors. The highest degree of the evil deed will cause a soul to be reborn as a denizen of hell, a lower degree of evil will cause a soul to be reborn as an animal, and the lowest degree will cause a soul to be reborn as a hungry ghost. According to the tradition, evil deeds that lead to becoming a hungry ghost are killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. Desire, greed, anger, and ignorance are all factors in causing a soul to be reborn as a hungry ghost because they are motives for people to perform evil deeds.

The protagonist of *The Hungry Ghosts*: Shivan, whose father is Tamil and whose mother is a Sinhalese, cannot completely lay claim to either heritage because of ethnic strife and personal loyalties. The young Shivan is deeply affected by the country's political violence, so much so that he begs his mother to move when Canada offers fast-track immigration to Tamil families. He sadly observes to a Sinhalese friend, "If we are abandoning Sri Lanka, it's because Sri Lanka abandoned us first." (75)

Early in the novel, Shivan's grandmother charges herself with her grandson's moral education, using Buddhist fables to instruct him. These stories of men and women stripped of the ability to fulfill their desires, the titular Hungry ghosts, provide the young Shivan with a truth about the human condition. What tears us most apart cannot be ascribed solely to war or to culture or the prejudices of a foreign home. As he notes when reflecting on his grandmother, "There are many times when I have raged inside at that phrase of hers, at that malformed thing she calls love. There are many Buddhist undertones in the novel. The title itself strikes a very poignant note. There are continuous repetitions of the word "hungry ghost" or the "unsatisfied *perethaya*" in the novel.

"In Sri Lankan myth, a person is born a *perethaya* because, during his human life, he desired too much- hence the large stomach that can never be filled through the tiny mouth. The *perethaya* that appear to us are always our ancestors, and it is our duty to free them from their suffering by feeding Buddhist monks and transferring the merit of that deed to our relatives" (24).

The story is a reference to the ways of Shivan's grandmother who desires on getting more wealth even by humiliating her daughter for marrying a Tamil. She is referred to as a ghost with the unquenched thirst for material prospects.

Another Buddhist myth that gets referred to in the novel is the story of Chakkupala wherein in his previous birth he was an eye doctor who cured a woman's blindness. But the woman instead of keeping her word of being in permanent bondage to the doctor when cured plays blind again. The angry doctor gave her another medication that permanently blinded her. This bad karma of the doctor comes into play in his next birth whereas a monk when he was about to reach enlightenment he was struck blind.

The key concept in the Buddhist religion, the "karma" is introduced here. Karma means action, work or deed; it also refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of an individual (cause) influence the future of that individual (effect). Good intent and good deed contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deed contribute to bad karma and future suffering. *Karma* is closely associated with the idea of rebirth in many schools of Asian religions. In these schools, karma in the present affects one's future in the current life, as well as the nature and quality of future lives or one's *samsāra*.

The relationship of *karma* to causality is a central motif in all schools of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist thought. The theory of karma as causality holds that (1) executed actions of

an individual affects the individual and the life he or she lives, and (2) the intentions of an individual affects the individual and the life he or she lives.

The Buddhist ideology of *karma* in reference to the newly elected President Chandrika Kumaratunga who is a peace emissary is:

"... the recommencement of the war in this new phase reminded me of those Buddhist tales my grandmother often told, in which karmic crime travels with characters into their next reincarnation, the same emissaries playing out in a new phase, the characters helpless to escape the fruits of their karma." (14)

Another characteristic shared by Karmic theories, is that good karma produce the good effect on the actor and bad karma produces a bad effect. The consequence or effects of one's karma can be described in two forms: *phalas* and *samskaras*. A *phala* or result is the visible or invisible effect that is typically immediate due to the karma's or deeds within the current life. In contrast, *samskaras* are always those invisible effects that are produced inside the actor because of the *karma*, thus transforming the agent and affecting his or her ability to be happy or unhappy in this life as well as in future lives. The theory of *karma* is often presented in the context of *samskaras*.

The story of the naked *perethi* who comes in the form of an old poor woman to three drunken men, who cannot enjoy the riches bestowed upon her directly points to the grandmother who has all her riches around her but was unable to enjoy them. All that she touched within her hands including the grandson whom she thought to be an heir to her unclaimed kingdom. This tale is told towards the end of part one of the novel. The reference is being made about the current marooned circumstance of the protagonist's grandmother who is surrounded by many good things but is unable to enjoy it.

The friendship that Shivan shares with Mili Jayasinghe is been told in the tale of Manikantha and the Hermit wherein the hermit asks Manikantha for the jewel on his forehead. The third time it is asked Manikantha leaves him forever. The pining the hermit had after his friend left him is equated to the kind of emotion Shivan finds in himself as he found his friend waiting for him on his return to Sri Lanka. The tale is set forth in the background to the relationship of Shiva with Mili Jayasinghe.

Another of the Buddhist myth is the formation of the goddess Kali. The story of an impregnated junior wife who had been killed by a senior wife and who was cursed by the former to devour their sons form the main theme of the story. They are born again and again as a means of revenge for the previous birth. Here, Buddha speaks of bad "karma" that was initiated by both women which can only be cured by compassion. The riots in Sri Lanka are also initiated by the revenge from the past riots. Thus, indirectly the novelist here wants compassion between both the ethnic groups putting an end to the decade-long enmity between them. The justification of the tale is given by the author by saying that the karmic effects cannot be washed away soon but it takes a long time.

The land that killed thousands and still mourning the loss of bereaved, has many unsatisfied *peretheyas* who still haunts the place. Now at least, the bad karma needs to be stopped and the good karma needs to be instilled. This needs the present generation to give up arms against one another, to believe in humanity, thereby releasing the *peretheyas* to rest in peace. Throughout the novel, Syam Selvadurai finds the only way of reconciliation with the past in Sri Lanka which is compassion to one's fellow beings. Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* is written with an ambiguous moral to both the tormenter as well as the tormented by acting as a warning to the actors of injustice and a solace to the victimized.