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## Revisiting The Past: A Narrative Exploration Of Trauma And Identity In Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons Of Maali Almeida*

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This article explores the narrative intricacies of Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the first novel by a Sri Lankan author to win the Booker Prize in 2022. Through the lens of narratology, it examines how the novel's ghostly protagonist—a photographer navigating the chaos of the Sri Lankan Civil War—serves as a vehicle for both historical reflection and social critique. The analysis highlights the novel's diverse narrative modes, including historical elements, political satire, second-person narration, fantasy, surrealism, and queer representation. By blending these genres, Karunatilaka not only revisits a crucial historical moment but also challenges conventional narratives and creates alternate histories. Ultimately, this study underscores the novel's capacity to provoke readers into reevaluating their understanding of historical episodes, demonstrating the power of storytelling in confronting the shadows of the past.

Keywords: Narratology, social critique, political satire , surrealism, queer representation

Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* emerges as a groundbreaking narrative that intertwines the ghostly perspective of its protagonist, a photographer caught in the turmoil of the Sri Lankan Civil War, with a vivid exploration of memory, trauma, and identity. Winning the Booker Prize in 2022, this novel not only enriches the landscape of Sri Lankan literature but also invites a deeper understanding of the complex historical and cultural fabric of the region. Through a narratological lens, we can dissect the innovative narrative strategies Karunatilaka employs to revisit this pivotal historical moment. Karunatilaka employs a multi-layered narrative structure that melds elements of historical fiction with dark humor and surrealism. The story unfolds through the ghost of Maali Almeida, whose afterlife becomes a canvas for exploring the horrors of war. The use of a ghostly narrator serves to create a unique perspective, enabling readers to confront the brutal realities of the civil war while also engaging with a narrative that is laced with wit and irony.

The novel's setting is deeply rooted in the historical context of the Sri Lankan Civil War, and Karunatilaka intricately weaves real events and figures into the narrative. This historical grounding not only anchors the story in reality but also serves as a vehicle for political satire. By using humor to address the absurdities and atrocities of war, the author critiques not only the conflict itself but also the broader societal and political structures that perpetuate violence. One of the most striking narrative techniques employed in the novel is the use of second-person narration. This choice immerses readers directly into the experience, compelling them to confront the events alongside the protagonist. The direct address creates an intimate connection, challenging readers to engage with the moral complexities of the narrative and reflect on their own perspectives regarding history and conflict.

The blending of fantasy and surrealism in the novel enhances its emotional depth. Karunatilaka constructs a world where the boundaries between life and death, reality and illusion, are fluid. This surreal quality allows for a more profound exploration of grief and loss, as the protagonist navigates a landscape filled with memories and echoes of the past. It also invites readers to question the nature of truth in historical narratives, highlighting the often fragmented and subjective nature of memory. Incorporating queer elements into the narrative, Karunatilaka broadens the scope of identity representation within the context of war. The exploration of sexual identity amid the backdrop of civil strife not only enriches character development but also challenges conventional narratives surrounding masculinity and heroism in wartime. This intersectionality invites readers to reconsider how personal identities are shaped and reshaped by historical circumstances.

Karunatilaka's novel acts as a medium for creating alternate histories, encouraging readers to rethink their understanding of significant historical events. By presenting multiple perspectives and intertwining fact with fiction, the narrative invites a re-examination of established historical narratives. This multiplicity challenges the idea of a single, definitive history and suggests that memory itself is inherently unreliable, often influenced by personal and cultural narratives. Karunatilaka started writing it a decade ago soon after the country's long civil war ended. Karunatilaka told the Associate Press "I didn't feel there was enough truth or reconciliation. It was just one side blaming the other side and trying to just apportion whose fault it was rather than addressing the causes". When he began working on the novel, the climate of Sri Lanka was clouded by debates about the aftermath of the war, who killed whom, how many were killed, how many of those were innocent and who was to blame. Karunatilaka says that "the fear of violence is something that hangs over all of us".

The spirits that populated Karunatilaka's narrative languishing in the winds of Colombo for justice that will never come, are based on real-world figures from 1989. Karunatilaka says, "You have the student revolutionary leader who assassinated, then you have the moderate Tamil leader who was also assassinated". (*The Seven Moons of Maali* 4) His tone reflecting one of the tragic realities of war: whatever side you're on, you're always making an enemy of someone. 'It's the ghost of Sri Lanka's past'. These spirits personify the sparring ideologies that overwhelmed the wartorn nation. Maali Almeida for his past is representative of the privileged, English-speaking faction of Colombo that remained sheltered from the worst of the war. He may have passed on three decades ago but in many ways, Karunatilaka's protagonist is the figure head of our generation. He is cynical and chaotic, torn between conflicting identities. In particular, the novel concerns itself with the unspeakable atrocities of the Tamil pogrom in July 1983, when in the violent confrontation between the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), the government, the military, and the Marxist radicals, hundreds of Tamil citizens were violently executed and burnt to death in their homes and out in the streets. It is estimated by various national and international human rights organisations that thousands of Sri Lanka's both Tamil and Sinhalese were killed in 26-year war that ended in 2009 with the government defeating in LTTE.

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* tells the story of Malind Albert Kabalana Almeida, a professional photographer and a 'fixer' for the foreign press covering the war, son of a Sinhalese father and a Eurasian Burgher mother, the second person 'you' narrator of the novel. The Seven Moons refer to the seven nights that he has at his disposal to finish whatever it is that dead entities have to finish in the land known as 'In between' to go over to another region in the post death world called the 'light' whose objective is to get you to forget this just finished life. Maali does not remember how he was murdered or who murdered him and why, the novel has the familiar

stirrings of a murder mystery. Maali is a slightly confused, but bemused and detached observer of the carriage on all sides-Tamil, Sinhalese, Marxist, the military - in the early chapters which accounts for the sometimes-breezy register of the novel. For instance, here is Maali learning his way around the post death region known as In between. His teacher is Sena, a young Marxist radical murdered by the government:

Sena climbs to a vacant branch and u follow

‘why are we sitting here?’ you ask

‘Mara trees catch winds. Like radios catch frequencies. So do bo trees

. Banyan trees and probably any other big tree that blows winds’

‘I thought the wind blows the trees’

Your grandfather thought the world was flat. Do you want to be a ghost or a ghoul?’

‘What,s the difference?’ ‘A ghost blows with the wind.

A ghoul directs the wind’ (102).

One hesitates to use the word ghost, ghoul or spirit to describe what Maali Almeida is in this other world or to ascribed the word ‘cimbo’ or ‘purgatory’ to characterize another world in this novel. Karnunatilaka civil war novel is a fear less take on a painful national subject not to re stage historical inequities and hostiles, to stand with Sri Lanka's by amplifying the voices of it's dead against oblivion and invisibility in march of time. Karnunatilaka says:

1989 was the darkest year in my memory, where there was an ethnic war, a Marxist uprising, a foreign military presence and state counter – terror squats. It was a time of assassination, disappearance, bombs corpse. But by the end of 1990s, most of the antagonist were dead, so I felt safer writing about these ghosts, rather than those was closer to the present (Booker winner Karunatilaka on why he went back 20 years to dark days of 1989 2).

The narrative really takes off when Maalis charismatic flat mates, DD and Jaki enter the scene. Like thousands of Sri Lankas who searched for disappeared family members and friends during the war, the two Tamil cousins hunt for their loved one and then, heart breakingly, for his body and the box of photographs they know was previous to him. Through these texts the writer tries to say about social conditions with in Sri Lanka during the civil war and why the suicide rate in country was high. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* which was published in India 2020 under the title Chats with the Dead’is Karnunatilaka’s second novel.

Political satire is the use of humour and exaggeration to criticize or ridicule aspects of government and public affairs. The effect of this kind of satire rests on the use of allusion, a reference to a well-known person, event, or thing, and caricature, which exaggerates some feature of what is being referenced. Shehan Karunatilaka says “Satire and humour is Sri Lanka’s way of dealing with distress.” (The Indian Express 5)

The book is a supernatural thriller/satire, generously sprinkled with Sri Lankan politics. The novel concerns itself with the unspeakable atrocities of the Tamil pogrom in July 1983, when, in the violent confrontation between the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), the government, the military, and the Marxist radicals,13 hundreds of Tamil citizens were violently executed and burned to death in their homes and out in the streets. The novel is depicting the brutality of the island’s conflicts, the JVP uprising, the LTTE’s war in the north, and the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in the Jaffna Peninsula. In July 1983, Sri Lanka’s capital of Colombo erupted in anti-Tamil pogroms effectively sanctioned by the state. The violence followed the deaths of 13 Sinhalese Sri Lankan Army soldiers at the hands of Tamil militants in the city of Jaffna. The night after the ambush, mobs from the country’s Sinhalese majority targeted and attacked Tamils—members of the country’s largest ethnic minority group.In Colombo. Tamils were murdered or displaced, Tamil houses and offices burned. The violence raged for days before then-President J.R. Jayewardene said anything. The death toll is estimated to have

been in the thousands, although no official number was ever announced. What happened in Colombo echoed all over the country, and many Tamils fled, some leaving Sri Lanka forever. Although ethnic tensions preceded this event, known as Black July, by decades, it is often considered the beginning of the Sri Lankan civil war.

Maali is a witness to the brutality of the insurrections in Sri Lanka. Working for newspapers and magazines, his ambition is to take photographs "that will bring down governments, Photos that could stop wars." He has shot "the government minister who looked on while the savages of 83 torched Tamil homes and slaughtered the occupants", and taken "portraits of disappeared journalists and vanished activists, bound and gagged and dead in custody." (55) The people he meets in this bleakly quotidian landscape are victims of the violence that plagued Sri Lanka in the 80s, including a Tamil university lecturer who was gunned down for criticising militant separatist group the Tamil Tigers. Dr. Ranee is based on Rajani Thiranagama, a doctor and professor of anatomy at the University of Jaffna's medical school. Thiranagama was a dissident and critic of the militant separatist Tamil Tigers; in 1989, they assassinated her.

Successive governments have refused to investigate war crimes by both government forces and Tamil separatists. At least 44 Sri Lankan journalists have been killed or disappeared during the island's internal conflicts a leftist uprising and the Tamil separatist war between 1971 and 2009, according to media rights organisations. At least 14 of them were killed or went missing under the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose brother Gotabaya was accused of being the architect of notorious "white van abductions" that preceded the extrajudicial killings of dissidents. In one scene, two characters discuss a human rights-minded Rajapaksa holding up a leaflet on the "Mothers of the Disappeared" in parliament, advocating for the state to identify the "morgues full of our innocent dead." The Sri Lankan journalist Richard De Zoysa, who was abducted and killed in Colombo in 1990. De Zoysa was gay, rumoured to be connected to the Southern Marxist insurrection, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and is generally believed to have been killed by a government death squad. "It's easy to shout when you're in opposition," one character says. "Let young Rajapaksa run a war and see what happens. If he had to deal with the JVP, what would he do?". (108) The novel references several historical events and personalities from the civil war; for instance, the character of the corrupt minister Cyril Wijeratne appears to be modelled after the real Ranjan Wijeratne, the minister of Defence to whom the government's death squads allegedly reported, and, the character of the savage military general Major Raja Udugampola, the leader of Sri Lankan Tactical Force who runs the torture palace appears to be modelled after the real Deputy Police Inspector General Premadasa Udugampola who allegedly oversaw the torture and murder of Tamil separatists and Marxist radicals.

*The Seven Moons of Maali* Almeida stands as a significant contribution to the discourse surrounding the Sri Lankan Civil War and its enduring impact on collective memory. Through a complex interplay of narrative techniques, Shehan Karunatilaka not only engages with the historical realities of his homeland but also prompts a broader reflection on the nature of history, identity, and the power of storytelling. By revisiting these shadows of the past, the novel offers a poignant reminder of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of profound trauma.

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