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The Dead Speak: Exposing Human Rights Violations in Sri Lanka through Karunatilaka's Narrative

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Abstract:

Shehan Karunatilaka's The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida (2022) provides a haunting exploration of the Sri Lankan Civil War through the unique perspective of a dead war photographer who seeks justice from the afterlife. The novel exposes the grim realities of human rights violations, enforced disappearances, political assassinations, and state-sponsored violence that occurred during one of South Asia's darkest periods. By employing a spectral narrative voice, Karunatilaka transforms the dead into moral witnesses, challenging collective amnesia and the silencing of the oppressed. This paper examines how the author's narrative strategies—satire, dark humor, and posthumous narration—serve to reveal the atrocities of war and the complicity of political and military powers. It situates the novel within postcolonial and trauma theory frameworks, emphasizing the role of literature in bearing witness to historical violence and reclaiming suppressed truths.

Keywords: Shehan Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Sri Lankan Civil War, Human Rights Violations, Postcolonial Trauma, Violence, Justice.

Introduction

The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) remains one of the most violent and traumatic episodes in South Asian history. It witnessed ethnic cleansing, disappearances, torture, and mass killings that tore apart a nation struggling with postcolonial identities. In *The Seven*

Moons of Maali Almeida (2022), Shehan Karunatilaka revisits this period through a distinctive narrative mode where the dead speak, and ghosts recall the horrors the living have forgotten. The protagonist, Maali Almeida, a war photographer and gambler, awakens in the afterlife after his

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mysterious murder and has seven moons to uncover who killed him and to expose the truths buried by war and politics.

Karunatilaka's novel serves as both a work of magical realism and a historical testimony. Through the voice of a dead narrator, it interrogates state violence, journalistic suppression, and moral decay during wartime Sri Lanka. As Maali reflects, "If you are murdered in Sri Lanka, it is rarely personal. There is always a reason. Politics, religion, ethnicity take your pick" (*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, p. 11). This single line encapsulates the systemic nature of violence that transcends individual motives to reveal collective moral collapse.

This paper explores how Karunatilaka's narrative unmask human rights violations in Sri Lanka, particularly those perpetuated by political regimes and militant groups. It also examines how the author uses the supernatural as a literary strategy to give voice to the silenced dead, bridging fiction and testimony.

Human Rights Violations during the Sri Lankan Civil War

The Sri Lankan conflict was marked by severe human rights abuses committed by both the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch documented widespread violations extrajudicial killings, disappearances, torture, and the use of child soldiers. In this context, Karunatilaka's narrative

becomes a moral and historical document that fictionalizes real atrocities to expose the psychological trauma of a divided nation.

Through Maali Almeida's ghostly journey, the novel brings to light the fate of the disappeared those killed and denied even the dignity of remembrance. Maali confesses, "The dead are piled so high here that we trip over them even in dreams" (p. 67). This imagery echoes the collective memory of those erased from history, making the dead active participants in Sri Lanka's unhealed narrative.

Robert Young, in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001), argues that "postcolonial nations inherit structures of domination that perpetuate new forms of violence under independent governments" (Young, 2001, p. 132). Karunatilaka's Sri Lanka exemplifies this notion, where independence did not bring justice but a reconfiguration of oppression—the ghosts of the past haunt the postcolonial present.

Narrating the Dead: The Spectral Perspective

Karunatilaka's decision to employ a ghost narrator serves a profound purpose: It allows the dead to narrate history when the living are silenced. The afterlife in the novel mirrors the chaos of the war-torn nation a bureaucratic, confusing, and indifferent space. Maali's spectral journey represents the persistence of memory and the impossibility of erasing truth. He reflects, "The livings forget. The dead

don't. That's the only advantage we have" (p. 142). This line highlights the moral responsibility of the dead to bear witness to injustice. The dead become chroniclers of crimes that the living world suppresses. A postcolonial reading of this device aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "unhomeliness," where the boundaries between the real and the unreal blur, exposing the instability of identity and history. The afterlife in Karunatilaka's work becomes a metaphorical space for alternative historiography a site where the silenced reclaim their narratives.

Exposing Atrocities: Violence, Torture, and the Disappeared

Throughout the novel, Karunatilaka documents multiple forms of human rights violations torture chambers, military abductions, and secret burials. Maali recalls, "You saw too much, clicked too much, and you thought truth could save this island. It won't" (p. 212). This line reflects the futility of truth in a nation where journalism and morality have been corrupted. The author's tone oscillates between irony and tragedy, depicting how political ideologies dehumanize ordinary citizens. Maali's lover, Dilan, becomes a representation of the vulnerable civilian, constantly threatened by state surveillance. The novel references real historical figures and events such as the mass killings in Jaffna and Colombo disappearances blending fact with fiction to expose institutional complicity.

As Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) did two decades earlier, Karunatilaka uses the motif of the dead body as evidence. In both novels, the corpse speaks truth to power. Yet, Karunatilaka's approach is more overtly satirical; he mocks the bureaucracy of death, turning the afterlife into a parody of government offices. This grim humor reinforces the absurdity of a system that normalizes atrocity.

Memory, Justice, and the Search for Truth

One of the central concerns of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is the question of justice. The novel asks whether truth has any redemptive power in a corrupt society. Maali's mission to reveal the hidden photographs he captured during his lifetime symbolizes the struggle for moral clarity amidst chaos. His camera becomes a metaphor for witnessing the human need to record and remember. Karunatilaka writes, "If the pictures were seen, perhaps they'd believe. Perhaps someone would care" (p. 238). The conditional "perhaps" captures the despair of a journalist who understands that visibility does not guarantee accountability. In post-war Sri Lanka, justice remains spectral seen yet unattainable.

Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), suggests that trauma resists direct representation and must be approached indirectly through fragmented

narratives. Karunatilaka embodies this principle by using the dead narrator, fragmented memory, and dreamlike sequences to mirror the fractured national consciousness. The novel's conclusion offers no closure; instead, it leaves Maali suspended between worlds, symbolizing the unresolved grief of a nation still haunted by its own ghosts.

Karunatilaka's Narrative Style: Satire and Political Commentary

Karunatilaka's narrative style is a fusion of satire, magical realism, and investigative fiction. His humor is dark and biting, often used to critique political hypocrisy. He describes Colombo as "a city where every smiling face hides a secret file" (p. 53), encapsulating the paranoia of a surveillance state. The author's use of wit does not diminish the horror it accentuates it. As Salman Rushdie did in *Midnight's Children* (1981), Karunatilaka uses absurdity to illuminate truth. The absurd becomes the only possible language for unspeakable violence. Furthermore, the novel exposes not only state brutality but also social complicity. Maali accuses himself and others of moral apathy: "You photographed corpses, drank whiskey, and called it journalism" (p. 201). Here, Karunatilaka indicts the intellectual class for their silence and detachment. This moral self-critique aligns the novel with postcolonial ethics, where writers use fiction to challenge both colonial and postcolonial systems of domination. By weaving humor with horror, Karunatilaka

humanizes the inhuman, transforming satire into resistance.

Conclusion

Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* stands as a literary memorial to the countless victims of Sri Lanka's civil war. Through its spectral narration, it reimagines testimony from beyond the grave, forcing readers to confront forgotten atrocities. The novel transforms the dead into witnesses, turning memory into a form of justice when institutions fail. Karunatilaka's narrative demonstrates that literature can function as a moral archive preserving what politics seeks to erase. By exposing state terror, ethnic violence, and journalistic corruption, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* challenges readers to rethink how nations remember and forget. In allowing the dead to speak, Karunatilaka restores dignity to the silenced and reclaims history from oblivion. As Maali poignantly concludes, "The dead are not done with the living. We still have stories to tell" (p. 318). This haunting reminder ensures that Sri Lanka's ghosts remain unburied until truth is acknowledged.

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