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War, Death, and Political Violence in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

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Abstract:

Shehan Karunatilaka's The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida (2022) explores political violence, grief, memory, and the struggle to preserve truth in Sri Lanka during the turmoil of 1989. The novel follows Maali Almeida, a war photographer who awakens after death in a bewildering bureaucratic afterlife and has a limited period in which to understand his death and direct others towards photographs documenting atrocities. Combining mystery, satire, supernatural fiction, and political history, Karunatilaka gives narrative presence to lives that violence and official silence threaten to erase. This paper examines the novel through trauma theory, memory studies, identity studies, and a postcolonial perspective. It analyses political violence and civilian vulnerability, photography as evidence, the afterlife as a critique of bureaucracy, and the relationship between collective memory and justice. The novel complicates simplified accounts of Sri Lanka's conflict by representing violence among and within communities as well as across ethnic and political divisions. Maali's photographs are powerful not because they automatically guarantee justice, but because they preserve the possibility of public recognition and accountability. The paper argues that remembrance becomes an ethical responsibility: stories, images, and testimony challenge the disappearance of victims from both personal memory and national history.

Keywords: Shehan Karunatilaka; The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida; Political Violence; Trauma; Memory; Photography; Postcolonialism; Sri Lanka; Disappearance; Justice.

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Introduction:

Literature about war often examines not only violence on the battlefield but also the effects of conflict on ordinary lives, private relationships, public memory, and the stories a nation tells about itself. Shehan Karunatilaka's

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The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida, published in 2022, approaches these concerns through an unusual narrative device: its central character is already dead. Maali Almeida, a photographer who has documented the violence surrounding him, awakens in a strange afterlife that resembles a crowded and confusing administrative system. He has seven moons—approximately a week—to understand what happened to him and to guide people towards a hidden collection of photographs. The premise creates the momentum of a mystery, but the novel's larger questions concern the fate of evidence, the experience of disappearance, and the possibility of remembering victims whose stories have been suppressed. The narrative is situated in Sri Lanka during the political turmoil of 1989. The period was marked by violence involving state forces, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and other political actors. Civilians could be caught between competing forces, targeted because of their identities or affiliations, or harmed simply because they occupied dangerous spaces at dangerous times. The novel does not present this history as a neat confrontation between two stable sides. Instead, it depicts a society in which power, ideology, fear, and ethnic identity affect who becomes vulnerable and whose suffering receives public recognition. Maali's profession as a photographer is central to the novel's political and ethical concerns. Photography can make violence visible, preserve evidence, and challenge the claims of people who deny wrongdoing. Yet an image does not produce justice by itself. It must survive, reach an audience, and be interpreted in a context where people may be frightened or unwilling to acknowledge what it shows. The photographer is also not a detached observer outside history. Maali's own desires, relationships, risks, and contradictions complicate the role of the witness.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Memory, Identity, and Power:

Trauma theory provides a framework for understanding how violence continues to affect individuals and communities after the immediate event has ended. Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History considers trauma as an experience that may resist complete understanding and return through memory, repetition, and narration. This approach is relevant to Karunatilaka's novel because death does not bring the past to a clear conclusion. Maali's memories emerge unevenly, and the dead he encounters remain connected to losses that have not been adequately acknowledged. The afterlife gives narrative form to unfinished grief: the characters cannot simply move beyond what happened because the causes and consequences of their deaths remain unresolved. Trauma in the novel is also social and political. The violence does not remain confined to a single individual's psychological experience. Families live with uncertainty when loved ones disappear; communities carry fear and suspicion; witnesses may remain silent because speaking can be dangerous. A society marked by unresolved deaths may experience a collective disturbance in which public life is shaped by what cannot safely be discussed. The novel's ghosts therefore function as figures for the persistence of histories that official narratives may seek to close. Memory studies deepen this analysis. In On Collective Memory, Maurice Halbwachs argues that remembering is

shaped by social frameworks, including relationships, groups, and shared narratives. Memory is not merely a private storehouse of images. What individuals recall and what communities preserve are influenced by the stories they are permitted to tell and the institutions that validate particular versions of the past. Maali's photographs matter beyond his personal life because they may challenge the public denial of atrocities. They preserve moments that could otherwise be ignored, misrepresented, or erased. The novel also invites a discussion of identity. Maali is a photographer, a friend, a lover, a gambler, and a person whose private life does not fit comfortably within social expectations.

Political Violence and the Civilian Experience:

One of the novel's most disturbing arguments is that political violence cannot be understood only through battles or direct confrontations between armed groups. Violence reaches people who may have little control over the conflict around them. Civilians can be targeted because of ethnicity, political association, occupation, personal connections, or mere presence in a particular place. By presenting the dead as individuals rather than anonymous numbers, Karunatilaka turns large-scale political violence into a set of intimate human losses. The novel's representation of violence complicates a simple ethnic division. Its world includes Sinhalese people killing other Sinhalese, violence directed at Tamil civilians, and attacks associated with competing political forces. Such complexity matters because it resists the idea that a conflict can be explained through a single opposition between two uniform communities. Shared language or cultural identity does not guarantee safety when political ideology, suspicion, and state or militant power determine who is treated as an enemy. Nor does membership in a community make all its members equally powerful or equally responsible. The civilian perspective challenges the tendency to interpret conflict exclusively through political leadership and military strategy. Official narratives often focus on organisations, campaigns, and outcomes. The novel shifts attention to the consequences of these forces for people whose lives are interrupted or destroyed. Families must deal with uncertainty; friends may not know what happened; witnesses must decide whether telling the truth is worth the danger. The emotional costs of violence continue after the immediate event, and the absence of reliable information can become another form of suffering. The dead bodyguard and other frightening figures in the afterlife give political violence a grotesque physical presence. Their appearance suggests that institutions may claim order and authority while carrying histories of damaged lives. The supernatural elements do not remove the novel from political reality. Instead, they make the residue of violence impossible to ignore.

Maali Almeida: Witness, Participant, and Contradictory Self:

Maali's role as a war photographer makes him a witness to events that powerful people may want hidden. Yet Karunatilaka does not construct him as a perfectly detached moral hero. Maali is contradictory: he is courageous in some circumstances, careless in others, attached to people but not always honest with them, and driven by desires that complicate his professional role. This complexity makes his

eventual commitment to the photographs more meaningful. Bearing witness is not presented as proof of personal purity; it is a responsibility that can emerge from a flawed life. Maali's afterlife journey changes the questions he asks about himself. At first, the immediate mystery is his own death. He must reconstruct what happened and understand the conditions that brought him to this strange in-between world. Gradually, however, his personal investigation becomes inseparable from the fate of the photographs. The question is no longer simply who killed him, but whether the evidence he collected can reach the living. His identity as a photographer becomes a task that survives his physical existence. This shift complicates the relationship between private memory and public responsibility. Maali has relationships and secrets that belong to his personal life, but the photographs concern lives beyond his own. His journey requires him to consider how his actions may affect others and how the meaning of his work will be determined after his death. The dead cannot control how their stories are interpreted, yet they may still attempt to influence what the living do with the evidence left behind. Maali's character also resists reduction to a single identity category. His sexuality, friendships, professional life, and personal failings all contribute to his experience of the world. In a society where social and political labels can determine vulnerability, such complexity becomes ethically important. The novel asks readers to see the person behind the category without ignoring the social forces that shape that person's life.

Photography, Evidence, and the Politics of Truth:

Photography is the novel's central image of resistance to erasure. Maali's photographs record scenes that people in positions of power might prefer to conceal. His insistence that the images are not ordinary tourist pictures—"These are not holiday snaps" (Karunatilaka)—emphasises that they have a serious documentary purpose. They are meant to preserve evidence of violence and to challenge convenient public accounts. The photographs carry a claim: what happened should not be denied simply because the victims are dead or because the people responsible possess influence. At the same time, the novel recognises that photographic evidence is vulnerable. An image can be hidden, destroyed, misunderstood, or dismissed. It must be seen by someone who is prepared to take it seriously. Its meaning may depend on context, testimony, and the willingness of an audience to confront what it reveals. Photography can preserve an event, but it cannot automatically establish accountability. The chain between image and justice includes people who must protect, circulate, interpret, and respond to the evidence. The photographer is also implicated in the act of seeing. Maali's camera gives him access to scenes that others may not witness, but it does not make him entirely separate from the social world he records. The act of documentation involves decisions about where to look, what to frame, and what risks to accept. The novel's interest in Maali's flaws reminds readers that testimony emerges from situated human beings rather than from a perfectly neutral viewpoint. The limitations of the witness do not invalidate the evidence; they make the ethics of witnessing more complex. The photographs also matter

because of the problem of disappearance. When a person is missing, family members may be denied the certainty needed for mourning. Official records may be incomplete or unreliable, and the absence of a body can make it difficult to establish what happened. A photograph may preserve a face, a place, or a moment when other records fail.

Death, the Afterlife, and Bureaucratic Absurdity:

The afterlife in The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida is neither a peaceful reward nor a simple escape from suffering. It resembles a crowded administrative system in which the dead must wait, ask questions, follow procedures, and struggle to understand what has happened to them. This bureaucratic setting creates dark comedy, but its humour also sharpens the novel's criticism. The systems that manage death appear indifferent to the individual histories and unfinished needs of those who have died. The afterlife becomes a distorted reflection of institutions that process cases while failing to offer meaningful explanation or accountability. The seven-moon deadline gives the story urgency. Maali has only a limited period to understand his death, reconnect with people he left behind, and direct them towards his photographs. The deadline creates a narrative structure that resembles a race against time, but it also raises a moral question: what should matter most when time is limited? Maali's answer gradually moves beyond personal survival or revenge. His concern becomes whether the living can receive the evidence and whether the dead will be remembered as people rather than discarded as consequences of conflict. The comic and grotesque elements do not diminish the seriousness of the subject. Instead, they expose the absurdity of treating catastrophic human experiences as administrative problems. A file may be processed, a death may be recorded, and a procedure may be completed without the truth being established or the family receiving an answer. Bureaucracy becomes an image for the distance between formal closure and genuine justice. The novel's supernatural machinery allows this distance to appear in an exaggerated form. The afterlife also gives the dead a narrative presence that ordinary political discourse often denies them. They can speak, remember, argue, and demand recognition. Their presence unsettles the boundary between past and present. The dead are not restored to life, but neither are they fully removed from the moral world of the living.

Collective Memory, Silence, and the Families of the Missing:

Families of missing people face a particular kind of suffering: they may not know where a loved one went, what happened to that person, or whether they will ever be able to mourn properly. Uncertainty suspends grief. Without reliable information, relatives can remain caught between hope and despair, unable to establish a story that makes the loss comprehensible. In the novel, this uncertainty is not only a private family matter. It becomes part of public life in a society where speaking about violence may carry serious risks. Silence can function as a strategy of survival. People may avoid asking questions because they fear retaliation, distrust institutions, or believe that no answer will be forthcoming. Yet silence also has political consequences. When the circumstances of deaths remain unspoken, responsibility becomes harder to establish and

public denial becomes easier. The same silence that protects an individual in the short term may help preserve the conditions under which violence continues. Halbwachs's theory of collective memory helps explain why remembrance depends on social relationships and shared frameworks. A photograph or testimony does not become public memory simply because it exists. It needs people who will preserve it, discuss it, and connect it to a wider account of the past. The novel therefore places importance on the movement between Maali's private collection and the living world. His images need others to become witnesses in turn. Memory is a collective practice, not merely an individual act of recollection. Karunatilaka's ghosts can be understood as challenges to collective silence. They remain present because their deaths have not been adequately incorporated into a public account of what happened. Their stories reveal the gap between the official end of a conflict and the slower work of confronting its consequences. Even when fighting subsides, families may remain broken, trust may be damaged, and the truth about particular deaths may still be disputed.

Postcolonial Power and the Contest over National History:

A postcolonial reading of the novel examines how power influences the stories through which a nation understands itself. National history is often presented as a coherent account of origins, conflicts, sacrifices, and political outcomes. Yet such accounts may omit experiences that challenge the authority of institutions or complicate a preferred image of the nation. Karunatilaka's novel questions the idea that public history is a neutral record. It shows that the capacity to define events is connected to the capacity to control institutions, documents, images, and public speech. Said's analysis of culture and imperial power is useful as a broad reminder that representation is not separate from politics. In the novel, the struggle over Maali's photographs is a struggle over which version of events will be allowed to circulate. The images threaten those who benefit from denial because they may disrupt the distinction between what is publicly acknowledged and what is privately known. The issue is not only whether violence occurred, but who has the authority to describe it and determine its significance. The novel also challenges any single, unified account of national identity. Its representation of violence within communities and across political divisions suggests that identity categories can be mobilised by competing powers. A person's ethnic or political identity may influence the danger they face, but it does not fully describe their beliefs, relationships, or moral choices. The dead have individual histories that resist the simplifications of propaganda and political categorisation. This complexity does not mean that all actors possess equal power or that historical responsibility can be dissolved into general confusion. Rather, the novel insists on examining violence in its full political complexity while refusing to reduce victims to convenient symbols. To remember ethically is to recognise both the structures that make people vulnerable and the individuality of the lives those structures damage. The postcolonial perspective thus connects memory to authority.

Ethics of Witnessing and the Limits of Justice:

The novel distinguishes between bearing witness and achieving justice. Maali's photographs can preserve evidence, but they cannot by themselves identify every perpetrator, repair every relationship, or restore the dead. Their importance lies in keeping open the possibility of accountability. This distinction prevents the novel from offering a simplistic celebration of art or documentation. Images matter, but their power depends on the actions of people who receive them. Witnessing is also an ethical relationship. A photograph asks the viewer to recognise that the person represented had a life, relationships, and a future that violence interrupted. It may resist the tendency to treat victims as numbers or as examples of a political argument. Yet the viewer can still turn away, dismiss the image, or interpret it according to existing prejudices. The existence of evidence does not eliminate the need for moral choice. The novel's emphasis on the dead makes this responsibility especially urgent. Those who have died cannot speak directly to correct the public record or defend their reputations. Their stories depend on the living, including friends, family members, witnesses, journalists, and readers. The dead therefore place a demand on the living: do not confuse the end of a life with the end of responsibility for what happened to it. At the same time, Karunatilaka recognises that justice is constrained by fear and political power. People may be unwilling to disclose information when doing so could endanger themselves or others. Evidence may be suppressed, and public institutions may fail to act. Remembrance should not be mistaken for a complete solution. It is necessary because justice cannot be pursued honestly when the facts are denied, but it is not sufficient on its own. The novel's ethical position is therefore both demanding and modest. It demands that readers resist erasure and acknowledge the human reality of political violence. It is modest because it does not promise that memory will reverse history or guarantee punishment.

Conclusion:

Shehan Karunatilaka's The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida presents political violence as a force whose consequences extend beyond the moment of death. Through Maali's journey between life and the afterlife, the novel examines trauma, memory, identity, and the politics of truth. Its ghosts represent lives and histories that remain unresolved because their suffering has not been adequately acknowledged. The supernatural narrative does not turn away from Sri Lankan political history; it offers a way to make visible the emotional and ethical consequences of violence that public accounts may suppress. The novel's portrayal of civilians challenges accounts that focus exclusively on armed groups and political leaders. Its representation of violence within communities as well as across ethnic and political divisions resists a simplified narrative of conflict. Maali himself is not an uncomplicated hero, and his contradictions reinforce the novel's broader resistance to fixed categories. The dead cannot be reduced to victims, militants, or statistics; their lives contain attachments, mistakes, desires, and histories. Photography is the novel's central form of testimony. Maali's images preserve evidence that may challenge denial, but the novel recognises that evidence does not automatically produce justice. Images must be

protected, shared, and taken seriously. The afterlife's bureaucratic absurdity similarly exposes the difference between recording a death and acknowledging the human story behind it. The families of the missing and the ghosts of the dead reveal that a conflict may formally end while its moral and emotional consequences remain unresolved. Ultimately, Karunatilaka presents remembrance as an ethical responsibility. Memory cannot undo violence, and testimony cannot guarantee accountability, but forgetting allows injustice to continue without challenge. By giving narrative presence to those whose lives might otherwise disappear from public history, the novel asks readers to look beyond official narratives and recognise the human cost of political power.

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