

Myth, Mystery, and Murder: Trauma and Resistance in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to read Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, which is set against the 1980s Sri Lankan Civil War, and focuses primarily on how the mythic and magic realist elements within the narrative offer different variations of the idea of a national imaginary and delineate the intersectional traumatic experiences of the central character, Maali Almeida. Bronislaw Malinowski, in his *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, stated that people in pain often turn to myths, legends, and folktales to seek a form of psychological escape from the repressions imposed by society. The novel, however, uses fantasy not as a form of psychological escape, but as a form of resistance against the chaos and injustice which the Civil War ensued. Designed partly as a whodunit, with the ghost of a dead gay atheist photojournalist searching for his killer, it provides certain avenues of exploration into trauma studies and also looks at how the central character rises above his own trauma by resorting to fantasy and magic realism. Moreover, 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.

Keywords: Fantasy; Magic; Oppression; Resistance; Trauma

Shehan Karunatilaka's 2022 novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is posited against the background of the two-and-a-half decade long civil war in Sri Lanka which saw separatist conflicts rampant across the terrain. These conflicts involved various parties such as Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan government, the Janata Vimukti Peramuna - Marxist revolutionaries (JVP) trying to overthrow the state, the government-sponsored death squads – the Special Task Force (STF) abducting, interrogating and executing people suspected of being insurgents or terrorists, the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF), and foreign arms dealers, who were in cahoots with all of these fronts. The novel is populated by ghosts and spirits who have either been slaughtered by the larger powers at conflict or driven to kill themselves. The novel, spanning a time period of seven moons, is effectively narrated in the second person by the ghost of the dead, gay, atheist photojournalist Malinda Albert Kabalana, or Maali Almeida, who stalls his movement towards complete oblivion referred to

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as ‘The Light’ and inhabits a liminal space, here called the ‘In Between’, in order to showcase his war photographs which had the power to incriminate several powerful figures, while also searching for his killer. Maali’s return and his investigations can be traced to Ann Whitehead’s conceptualisation of the figure of the ghost in *Trauma Fiction* where she writes, “The ghost represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present. ... The traces of unresolved past events, or the ghosts of those who died too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned, possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living” (2004, 6).

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida, however, does not simply show ghosts and spirits as haunting presences but incorporates mythology and magic realism to construct a parallel universe which consists of the ‘In Between’, the ‘Afterlife’ and ‘The Light’, and which heavily intrudes upon the real world of late 1980s Sri Lanka.

The protracted sectarian conflicts and the ensuing civil strife in Sri Lanka, culminating in pogroms and massacres, were not purely social, political and economic phenomena. Rather it was an extension and perpetuation of certain mythological constructs like the myth of origin, the myth of superiority, the myth of ownership of land. This aligns with the Functionalist theory of myth as articulated by Bronislaw Malinowski, which states that myths are produced to ensure a steady, stable, orderly system which is then embedded in the collective psyche. Such processes of myth creation find resonance in Benedict Anderson’s concept of Imagined Communities, wherein he argues that nationalism is predicated on a sense of “horizontal comradeship” among individuals who, despite having no personal acquaintance, conceive of themselves as part of a collective entity marked by shared traits, histories, and beliefs. Annette Hamilton’s concept of the National Imaginary further elaborates on this theme, elucidating how “contemporary social orders are able to produce not merely images of themselves but images of themselves against others. An image of the self implies at once an image of another, against which it can be distinguished.” (1990, 16) This differentiation between the ‘national self’ and the ‘national other’, often formed on the basis of ethnic, religious, class, caste, and sexual identities, is fabricated as well as sustained through myths and meaning-making narratives. This splintered portrait of the national imaginary of Sri Lanka, which has persisted ever since its independence in 1948 and which burst out at the seams during the 1983 riots and the long civil war, is aptly portrayed in the novel. The dichotomy between the “national self” and the “national other” is explicated very clearly by Minister Cyril Wijeratne in response to the accusations levelled against him for orchestrating the 1983 pogroms. His nonchalant response to the accusations is –

“Be very careful, miss. You’re not the first to accuse me of organising mobs. As if I am that powerful. The mobs were furious and sadly the Tamils had to suffer. That is all.’

‘Innocent Tamils.’

‘It was very sad.’

‘So why didn’t you stop it?’



‘1983 was your people’s fault, not mine ... If you wake a sleeping lion, it will maul you. Always remember that.’” (Karunatilaka 2022, 214)³

The metaphor of the sleeping lion being woken which represents the peace-loving Sinhala Buddhists and the binary between “your people” and “mine” recur repeatedly throughout the novel and highlight the strict demarcations between the majority Sinhala Buddhists who perceived of themselves as the “national self” and the numerous minorities like the Tamils, the Burghers, and the Muslims who were perceived as the “national other.”

The novel undertakes the task of overcoming this chasm, of crossing over these imagined boundaries which imagined communities entail. And, in order to do so, the very first thing it does is have a protagonist of mixed ancestry. In a way, Malinda Albert Kabalana, born to a Tamil Burgher mother and a Sinhalese father, represents all of Sri Lanka itself, a character who, when enquired “‘So what are you?’” (232), can proudly proclaim “‘A Sri Lankan.’” (232) Through the protagonist himself, the novel articulates a vision of national identity that transcends ethnolinguistic divisions. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* also seeks to resist and counter this idea of the national imaginary by using magic realism and constructing an alternative mythology. This mythology amalgamates elements from Sinhala Buddhism, Sinhalese folklore, Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thodol)*, and the Hindu pantheon of gods and demons, while also mirroring the bureaucratic structures of governance. The concept of the seven moons, pivotal to the novel’s thematic structure, becomes an almost eponymous presence. It is present in Sri Lankan folklore, which believes that the soul hovers around for seven days after which rituals are held to guide it towards the Light, as well as in Buddhist mythology according to which –

“The body (Buddha’s) lay in state for six days and on the seventh day was placed on a great funeral pile. There was great difficulty in igniting the pyre, but when the moment had come, divinely ordained, the fire lit of its own accord.” (Ions 1983, 136)

The ‘In Between’, or *bardo*, which Maali inhabits is depicted as a space teeming with creatures like ghosts, ghouls, pretas, devils, yakas and demons. All of them are, however, born out of despair and tragedy. This is explicated by Dr. Raneer Sridharan, a Helper who has been trying to get Maali to move on to ‘The Light’, as

“yakas are made, not born, and each has a story that they no longer tell. The Cannibal Uncle was a Pettah bomb blast victim. The Feral Child was made to kill his uncles for the Tigers. The Sea Demon had been ragged to death at university. The Atheist Ghoul was a provincial councillor carved up by the JVP. Black Sari Lady lost five children to the war.” (275)

The creation of these spirits and their persistent presence in the afterlife speak largely of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the continuous-traumatic stress disorder (CTSD) they are subjected to. Among these is a *yaka*, a demon with “maroon eyes, jagged teeth, overgrown nails” (134), which acts as a Minister’s shadow and bodyguard, thus pointing out that even the afterlife is not bereft of hierarchies. This mythical creature further underscores the cracks and fissures inherent within the idea of the national imaginary by problematizing the origin myth of Sri Lanka itself –

³ Subsequent references are to the 2022 edition of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

“If the Mahavamsa is to be believed, the Sinhalese race was founded on kidnapping, rape, parricide and incest. This is not a fairy tale, but the story of our birth as given by the island’s oldest chronicle, a chronicle used to codify laws crafted to suppress all that is not Sinhalese and Buddhist and male and wealthy.” (136)

Moreover, by pointing out how both the Sri Lankan flag with its lion holding “the scimitar to the orange and green verticals that represent the Dravidian and Mohammedan, holding the minorities at knifepoint” (138) and the LTTE flag with its tiger “peeping Kilroy style between rifles. As if to say, I see your lion with sword, and raise you a tiger with two bayonets,” (138) it hints towards the violence embedded in the ancient myths, as if “to acknowledge that Lanka was founded on bestiality and bloodshed.” (138)

One of the driving forces behind the narrative, the *Mahakali*, “the In Between’s most powerful being,” (40) the devourer of lost souls, the one who feeds off despair, emerges here as a creature which is a fusion of the Buddhist pantheon, the Hindu gods and goddesses, and Sinhalese folklore. A non-binary, shapeshifting entity, which at times dons the “head of a bull on the body of a bear” (39), wears a necklace of skulls and has faces trapped beneath its skin, the *Mahakali* has numerous names like “Maruwa, Maha Sona, Kalu Balla, Kuveni” (40) and sits atop the torture chambers designed by the government death squad to feed off the agony of those being tormented down below. In answer to Maali’s question whether it was a Buddhist or a Catholic priest, it spits out “Does it matter? I have seen the world’s dark heart. And I have not yet met my maker. ... There is no God to follow, no Devil to fear. Energy is all there is.” (258) Maali’s afterlife is thus a space marked by godless anarchy, a realm where complete chaos prevails, which however opens up endless possibilities for everyone involved in it. It mirrors the social anomie engendered by the civil war and the pogroms in the living realm which had left no choice for most of its inhabitants but to turn into hapless victims, robbed of both their lives and their voices. The societal disarray of the afterlife and the In Between however open up different ways of responding to it, which, according to Robert K Merton’s theory of social anomie, can be grouped into certain categories like conformity, social innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. The stage has been set in this variation of the afterlife; the dead creatures gain some kind of an agency to choose their respective paths. This provides Maali with the opportunity to reveal the secret location of his negatives after his boxful of incriminating photographs is seized by the government and also to identify his killer; for Sena Pathirana, a dead JVP member, it lends him the agency to rally the masses and seek revenge for all those who had been executed by the regime; for the five dead Tiger child soldiers it is a life where they don’t have to follow orders. The Minister’s shadow, who had previously been the guardian demon of another politician Solomon Dias, the “Führer of Sinhala Only. Godfather of every shitstorm,” (135) perceives it as an opportunity to make sure that its master, the Minister of Justice (or Injustice for that matter) Cyril Wijeratne will end up as the most powerful being. Similarly, the pretas, the ghouls, the yakas, and the devils are given the opportunity to design their own paths. Some make mischief, some become the Crow Man’s disciples to earn *varam* (a type of spiritual currency which is useful in the spirit world), some become slaves of the Mahakali, and some eventually travel towards the Light. This magic realist setting of the afterlife then, while resisting the chaos and injustice which the civil war ensued, also raises questions about the value of life and the grievability of certain lives over others, as explored by Judith Butler. Butler postulates –



“... one way of posing the question of who “we” are in these times of war is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered un-grievable. We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An un-grievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all. We can see the division of the globe into grievable and un-grievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities, and to defend them against the lives of others—even if it means taking those latter lives.” (2009, 38)

Swarming with ghosts and spirits, each of whom has led distinct lives, the afterlife emerges as a domain where all lives are mournable irrespective of their socio-political inclinations. It is almost like a big after-party populated by a motley crew of “Slain Journalists, Defiled Beauty Queens, Tortured Revolutionaries, Murdered Housewives ... Colonial Slaves, Victims of Bombs, Beggars Killed by Drunks and Child Soldiers” (314), “Dead JVP-ers, Dead Tigers and Dead Innocents Suspected of Being Either” (313), dead prostitutes, ghosts of Kaffir slaves and foreign tourists. Even dead leopards and dogs are not excluded from this incessant restless carousal. All of these restless ghosts who have crowded the ‘In Between’ seem to be a metaphor for Sri Lanka. The island’s inability to find peace by overcoming the unrest seems to be rooted in its tumultuous past, in its inability to make peace with the past, in its restless ghosts who keep wandering about, who are unable to move on to ‘The Light’, who keep whispering bad ideas into people’s ears, and who are desperate enough to keep spilling over into the realm of the living much like the spirits in Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s 2001 movie *Pulse*. This conceptual framework of grievable and un-grievable lives prompts an examination of the etymology of the violence inflicted on the helpless. Moving away from words like “terrorism” and “war”, Adriana Cavarero coins the term “horrorism,” aimed at encapsulating the experiences and perspectives of the victim instead of that of the perpetrator. Cavarero writes —

“... on closer inspection, violence against the helpless does turn out to have a specific vocabulary of its own, one that has been known ... for millennia. Beginning with the biblical slaughter of the innocents and passing through various events that include the aberration of Auschwitz, the name used is “horror” rather than “war” or “terror,” and it speaks primarily of crime rather than of strategy or politics. Of course, in war and terror, horror is not an entirely unfamiliar scene. On the contrary. But this scene has a specific meaning of its own, of which the procedures of naming must finally take account, freeing themselves of their subjugation to power. To coin a new word, scenes like those I have just described might be called “horrorist,” or perhaps, for the sake of economy or assonance, we could speak of horrorism — as though ideally all the innocent victims, instead of their killers, ought to determine the name.” (2011, 3)

The ghosts and ghouls, born out of scenes which Cavarero would describe as “horrorist”, inhabit both the corporeal world and the afterlife. The narrative follows Maali’s ghost and his Nikon 3ST encountering girls with snapped necks, boys with cracked skulls, a “mother and daughter buried under bricks in Kilinochchi” (12), “ten students burned on tyres in Malabe” (12), a “planter tied to a tree with his entrails” (12), a “mass grave where the sunrise turned the paddy fields golden” (36), and “skeletons stretched to the horizon, dead children as far as the eyes could see.” (36) Maali and his camera also capture suicide bombers, torturers at work, and finally the dismembering and disposal of his own body. He narrates —

“Kottu holds down your body, hoping liquid will seep through the holes in the skull. The water baptises the brain, but the corpse still floats. Kottu swears and spits. Balal paddles towards the corpse, cleaver balanced over his head, like a frog playing a waiter. The cleaver is big and brown, dulled, no doubt, by the blood of a thousand cats.” (20)

Animal imageries abound in the text, right from the lions and the tigers present on the respective flags to the apparently harmless frogs, cats and dogs which at times resemble the perpetrators and at other times are mindlessly butchered by them. Moreover, the usage of a cleaver “dulled ... by the blood of a thousand cats” to dismember human bodies further points to the degradation of human life (and body) at the hands of the state. Despite its self-proclaimed advancements in civilization, humankind has persistently engaged in acts of violence, brutality and inhumanity that evoke profound horror – a phenomenon which may be aptly termed ‘horrorism’. This term encapsulates the foundational experiences that contribute to the traumatic recollection of the past. After the moment of war and terror has passed over, what remains predominantly is the enduring impact of horror. Maali’s exploits over the course of his seven moons present numerous visions of the afterlife which these souls haunt. Far removed from the usual imaginings of heaven and hell as propagated by different religions, Maali wakes up dead with his trusty Nikon 3ST, with the lens smashed and casing cracked, dangling around his neck, emblematic of his shattered past and the persisting reality he must navigate. What he soon encounters is nothing short of the bureaucratic administrative systems with their long queues, limited officials and tedious rules, which he likens to a tax office. Compared to this bureaucratic afterlife, the ‘In Between’ where Sena takes him proves to be an even more chaotic space where ghouls try to whisper into the ears of the living, where the dead are engaged in an endless play, at times even repeating the moment of their deaths. For Maali, thus, the afterlife does not offer any form of respite. Rather, the *bardo*, this interval between death and rebirth, provides Maali with an opportunity to negotiate his traumas – the trauma of his own death, the persistent trauma of sexual discrimination and ridicule, the trauma of witnessing and documenting violent conflicts, and notably, the trauma stemming from the morally complex act of having euthanized an old man, a mother and her dead child, and a dog, all of whom had been victims of a shelling in Jaffna. This conflation of human and animal victims seems like an ironic commentary on the way in which human life is at times measured at the same level with that of animals.

One of the inducers of his trauma is the discrimination and ridicule he has to encounter as a gay man in 1980s Colombo. Repeated recurrences of the words “homo”, “ponnaya”, “poof” at times evoked with derision, at other times with disgust, highlight the harassment which he has always been subjected to. For him, the threat of violence and persecution is always imminent on several fronts, one of which is owing to his sexual identity. Early on in the novel, he recalls a conversation with his father – “You realised you liked boys very early on. When your Dada told you that all poofs should be tied up and raped with knives, you looked down at your slippers and never looked him in the face again.” (24) This violence, at times implicit, at times explicit, makes itself apparent several times in the novel – when he is molested by a high-ranking army official Major Raja Udugampola and finally when he is killed by his boyfriend’s father since he refuses to give up their relationship. The trauma of getting killed ultimately links up to the long history of discrimination which he has had to endure. Maali’s own father’s threat finally comes to fruition as he is killed at the hands of his lover’s father. This linkage between individual trauma and societal prejudice highlights the broader



implications of homophobia and discrimination within the social fabric of 1980s Colombo, thereby emphasizing the personal and collective consequences of such systemic intolerance.

Maali's omnipresence after his death, though restricted to locations where either his remains have been or his name spoken, does not come with omnipotence. His current state almost mirrors the position he had occupied as a war photographer and a "fixer" (109) who would take up assignments from all parties involved – the CNTR (Canada Norway Third World Relief, a charity organisation which raised funds for Tamil victims), the army, and the Associated Press – while being constrained to the role of a silent witness to the mayhem and massacres unleashed before him. Katherine Isobel Baxter discusses the complex position of the photojournalist who has to assume some form of a self-effacing objective stance in order to act as a proxy for the audience. Baxter posits –

“This role as proxy for the viewing audience is a fraught one: the photographer is caught between an ethical and a financial obligation to supply apparently objective images to his or her audience (who after all buy these images), and a humanitarian obligation to the subject of their photography. Objectivity is what allows the story to be told but this frequently relies upon a suspension of the impulse to intervene. ... What remains unexamined in this mediation is the potential trauma that such witnessing inflicts on the mediating journalist.” (2011, 23)

Maali's trauma as a photojournalist recurs repeatedly throughout the text, particularly through his memories of the photographs he had taken in the conflict zones. His encounter with the ghost of a woman he had once photographed being burned alive triggers a painful memory of his own inability to counter this violence – “You could do nothing but shoot and that made you feel like you weren't doing nothing. You clicked her being dragged by the hair and doused in petrol. And, right when the match was lit, the Nikon jammed.” (60) Her reproach– “I know you were there ... I remember every face. The Minister was there, watching from his car. You were there, taking my picture, like it was some fucking wedding” (60) elicits from him a disheartened acknowledgement – “I was in the wrong place holding a camera.” (60) In a way, his camera ends up becoming a commentator on the traumatic events it has captured, thus countering the cameraman's supposed limitation and his role as a detached observer. Another photo which haunts him repeatedly is that of “a broken dog, a bleeding man, a mother and child” (37) who were the remnants of a shelling at Jaffna, thus poignantly capturing a moment when all creatures become one in their suffering. He says,

“You took this photo from the top of a crumbling building, and as you watch a hole grows larger in your stomach, until you feel it pushing at your throat. It is not the most gruesome photo in your box by a long stretch, but for some reason for you it is the saddest.” (37)

As is evident from this excerpt, the narrative performs the dual role of retaining the voice of the dead character Maali and also using a second person narrative style. According to Kali Tal,

“If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure. If the dominant culture manages to appropriate the trauma and can codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain unchanged.” (1996, 7)

By maintaining his distinctive voice, evident in the brash and bawdy tone he assumes and the gallows humour he revels in, Maali's ghost prevents the appropriation of his own tale. And in doing so, this dead, gay, atheist, photojournalist ends up preserving a piece of history, through

both his voice and his photographs, which has never been properly commemorated. Moreover, by adopting a second person narrative style, it implicates the reader within the scheme of events and refuses to let us remain passive observers. Thus, the flaneur-like stance adopted by the central character coupled with the second person narrative technique serves its purpose; instead of creating an illusory state it takes the readers into the very centre of the events.

His memory, which comes back to him in moments of bodily pain, in “sneezes, in aches, in scratches and in itches” (35), “in gasps and chokes and loose motions” (35), “in the form of cough. A whooping cough that hurts your brain and makes you roll forward” (250), evoke the concept of traumatic amnesia, a critical component in trauma studies, propounded by Cathy Caruth. For Maali, who exists as a spirit, the physical and the psychological trauma often relived through the remembrance of painful events, becomes a part of a complex process of suffering. Joshua Pederson, while proposing an alternative model of trauma theory, begins by referring to the Caruthian model as

“For Caruth, trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally. In the immediate aftermath, the victim may totally forget the event. And if memories of the trauma return, they are often non-verbal, and the victim may be unable to describe them with words.” (2014, 334)

While Maali struggles with recalling the face of his killer and also the location of his hidden negatives, it becomes evident over the course of the novel that his condition does not align neatly with clinical amnesia or the non-verbal post-traumatic states as outlined by Caruth. His inability to remember certain events cannot be conflated with amnesia; rather his repeated attempts at recalling these painful incidents become almost therapeutic. His is a different, perhaps more active engagement with traumatic memories. He says, “... you need to work harder at remembering. Memories may bring pain which you’d rather not endure, but there is one memory you wish for. ... You wish to remember where you hid the negatives. And all you know is that it is somewhere obvious, and somewhere close by.” (134) Caruth’s theory was based largely upon the work of Judith Herman who, in *Trauma and Recovery*, explains the difficulties faced by survivors when confronting their traumas. She notes – “As the narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, the patient finds it more and more difficult to use words. At times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting.” (Herman 2015, 177) For Maali, however, as garrulous as he is, there is no dearth of words. There are two ways he can retrieve his memories – by narrating and by photographing. He describes how memories come back to him in fleeting moments “each time you pull the camera to your eyes. In its glass peephole, you catch glimpses of light falling on faces, shadows spreading over hills, of pictures you took, and lenses you cracked. You remember bits and you retrieve pieces.” (35) The final memories, the moment of his death and the identity of his killer, come to him once he has decided to enter ‘The Light’. Through the character of Maali’s ghost, the text thus underscores the individual variability of traumatic memory and challenges the assumption that trauma invariably leads to verbal incapacitation and amnesia, suggesting instead a nuanced spectrum of memory recall capabilities among trauma survivors.

Thus, we may conclude by saying that the central character Maali Almeida, left without any choice, is compelled to don the garb of a ghost in order to rise above his traumas and seek answers. Even so, the afterlife provides him with a kind of agency which he could never have



possessed in the real world. By drawing upon the ideas of myth making, nationalism and national imaginary, the paper shows how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* succeeds in building a parallel universe in the afterlife which resists the divisive politics played out in the world below. It shows how the text, through its innovative use of magical realism and mythology, offers a profound commentary on the complexities of national identity, collective memory, and the potential for reconciliation and unity in a post-conflict society.

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