

“Most Lankans are Silent Seethers”: Haunting as Resistance, Spectral Temporality, and “the Dark Heart of Lanka” in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

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Abstract

This paper foregrounds Shehan Karunatilaka’s Booker Prize-winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*’s function as a reflection on the concept of haunting as resistance against forgetting, focusing on the notion of spectral temporality within the context of Sri Lanka itself as a spectral space informed by cultural amnesia. Leveraging Avery Gordon’s framework of ‘haunting’ through her work *Ghostly Matters* as a component of social life, and Jacques Derrida’s *specter* introduced in his work *Specters of Marx*, the paper follows traces of absent presences by interrogating the ways in which Sri Lanka’s ghosts demand reclamation of silenced events and delayed justice. This paper argues that *The Seven Moons* deploys haunting as a mode of political resistance through certain interconnected mechanisms rooted in Sri Lanka’s post-war context: enforced disappearance as state practice, photography as counter archive against institutional erasure, and the figure of Mahakali as expression of collective rage – all grounded in specific “sites of death”. It looks at enforced disappearance as a tool of state terror strategically employed by the Sri Lankan state, alongside laying bare distinctive triggers that actively participate in resisting institutionalized erasure. Finally, it evokes the haunting quality of certain sites of death suggesting their temporal discontinuity.

Keywords: Haunting, Absent presences, Temporality, Sri Lankan civil war, Disappearance, Resistance

Introduction

Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) constructs a narrative framework wherein the afterlife is presented as a purgatorial space resounding with the victims of Sri Lanka's twenty-six-year civil war. The armed conflict that began in 1983 primarily between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam), displaced thousands of Tamil families, triggered by the catastrophic burning of the Jaffna Public Library by the police in 1981 and the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983, infamously known as Black July.¹ These two events, as Maryse Jayasuriya argues, are integral to Sri Lankan writing "because they signify the reasons for the start of the ethnic conflict, a rending of one type of nationalism and the inauguration of another" (196). Sermal Wijewardene further stresses, based on De Votta and Haniffa, how the terror of Black July highlighted anxieties regarding the "deeply entrenched anti-minority prejudice" and "strengthened demands for a separate Tamil homeland" (29). Although rooted in deep-seated ethnic discord and entrenched discrimination targeting the Tamil community, the 80s radically altered the socio-political dynamics of the country. It is within this historical and spectral context that Karunatilaka, speaking at the 23rd International Literature Festival Berlin, posed the central inquiry animating his work, "What if we could let Sri Lanka's dead speak, what would the victims of Sri Lanka's war have to say ("Shehan Karunatilaka" 25:54-26:41). This question encapsulates an aspiration that is at once literary and political.

The long-standing civil war also saw multiple factions involved in separatist conflicts, plaguing the island nation with violence, bloodshed, and war crimes that garnered little to no acknowledgement from the government. Among them were also the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) Marxists involved in insurrection, the STF (Special Task Force) death squads undertaking executions of suspected LTTE or JVP, and the Indian Peace Keeping Force which committed various human rights violations instead of fulfilling its intended task, thereby further complicating the situation. The deterioration of Tamil-Muslim relations,

exemplified by increasing violence in the east and mass involuntary eviction in the northern parts,² also significantly characterized the conflict in the 1990s (Thiranagama 31). It is against 1990s Colombo, one of the war's most violent phases, that *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* situates its question. The reader encounters the protagonist Maali dead, who wakes up in the afterlife with the answer to the existential question, "Is there life after death? What's it like?" (2). Maali's journey, narrated in the disquieting second person – "you" instead of "I" or "he" – retraces the traumas of earlier massacres along with his own fractured memories, particularly recollecting the terror of Black July. His afterlife, neither redemptive nor mystical, is a spectral space called the "In Between", "a tax office" where "everyone wants their rebate" (4). It is a bureaucratic purgatory in which the "disappeared" and dead of Sri Lanka's war stand in line awaiting recognition and justice. Maali's aim is twofold: to uncover the truth behind his death, and more importantly, to get his lover-best friend Jaki to discover his box of photographs – photographs that he naively believes "will bring down governments... could stop wars" (Karunatilaka 6). Meanwhile, the narrative posits the afterlife not as transcendental release but as a space where the aftermath of a violent conflict persists, swarming with the ghosts of real-life war victims – characters inspired by the human rights activist Rajani Thiranagama and the journalist Richard de Zoysa, both killed for their criticism of the war's violence.³ Karunatilaka employs these literal ghosts as a structural device to highlight the destructive socio-political history of Sri Lanka (Sharma and Tripathi 173), bringing the spectral into dialogue with the socio-political, thus integrating it as a thematic and political component within the narrative.

This paper argues that *The Seven Moons*⁴ deploys haunting as a mode of political resistance through certain interconnected mechanisms rooted in Sri Lanka's post-war context: enforced disappearance as state practice, photography as counter archive against institutional erasure, and the figure of Mahakali as expression of collective rage – all grounded in specific haunted "sites of death". In the novel, the dead do not simply disappear—they linger as

manifestations of unresolved trauma, political violence and structural amnesia, and wherein haunting is at the epicentre. Towards the end of the war, thousands of Sri Lankans fell victim to government-led enforced disappearances for their alleged involvement either with the LTTE, or other insurrectionary groups. These mass abductions and disappearances were strategically employed as tools for terror by both armed forces and various insurgent groups in Sri Lanka (Buthpitiya 121). Thus, in Sri Lanka's post-war context, haunting constitutes a political necessity, and Karunatilaka's emphasis on the "disappeared" corresponds explicitly to the nation's socio-political condition. Described by Malathi De Alwis as "one of the most insidious forms of violence as it seeks to obliterate the body and forestalls closure" (379), disappearance produces the ghost by denying the disappeared any formal acknowledgement. Its calculated deployment by the state sought not only killing but erasure, leaving the victim in a liminal space between life and death, unacknowledged and ungrievable. This produces what might be termed the Sri Lankan spectral condition: the disappeared remain trapped in perpetual social and legal liminality, their bodies discarded in sites of death such as the Palace, repositories where state violence remains embedded beneath the surface. Correspondingly, this theorization of 'disappearance' manifests in Karunatilaka's work through Maali's *disappearance/death* itself. Thus, this paper looks at enforced disappearance as a tool of state error "systematically employed by the Sri Lankan government" (Zarook 2) alongside laying bare distinctive triggers and sites within the narrative that actively participate in resisting institutionalized erasure. Furthermore, Maali's photography insists on making visible that which the state makes disappear, functioning as spectral evidence haunting the living. Finally, presiding over the Palace, the Mahakali exemplifies the paradox between obliteration and justice by acting as a 'mnemonic trigger'⁵. The paper then argues that her presence acts in defiance with the war-torn nation's selective amnesia, further situating haunting as an active political undertaking.

⁵ In *The Seven Moons*, the production of haunting is performed through various ghosts,

ghouls and demons that resist erasure of their traumas by persisting in the In Between. Karunatilaka's treatment of the novel as a haunted narrative can be aptly traced to Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, where she writes, "the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (8). Gordon believes that constructing a ghost story puts the "political status and function of systematic hauntings" (18) at stake. Karunatilaka's second-person narration calls attention to the absent presence of suppressed traumas, violence and injustices by bringing to the forefront the silenced and the unacknowledged aspects of social life. His "you" designates not a general reader but a specifically Sri Lankan subject, implicated in state's enforced amnesia. As Trevor L. Hoag articulates in "Ghosts of Memory: Mournful Performance and the Rhetorical Event of Haunting", ghosts "are typically disruptive and terrifying in that they reveal the utter lack of control that one possesses over what "possesses" one's thoughts and experiences" (10). This is adeptly mirrored in *The Seven Moons*—spirits whisper into the ears of people 'Down There', ultimately controlling their actions in order to gain "justice for all those killed...to allow those without graves to find vengeance" (29). Thus, the ghost functions as an active agent rather than a passive victim within the novel.

Similarly, the theory of hauntology and spectrality that originated with Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* further illuminates this mechanism. Derrida examines the existence of ghosts with respect to justice, "of justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer" (xviii). For him, specters possess more power in comparison to the living, "they exert a rhetorical force on life that, though spectral, produces significant effects" (Hoag 9). Elaborating on the figure of the specter, Derrida explores the lingering presence of absent presences within society, which essentially fractures temporal continuities. In other words, his hauntology examines the persistent reverberations felt upon the present on account of the past,

revealing the intricacies of memory, identity and the spectral aspects of historical phenomena. In the Sri Lankan context, this temporal rupture is far from abstract—violence lingers in the post-war present, there manifests the recurring cycle of oppression, and the war refuses to end. *The Seven Moons* draws attention to this temporal disruption through Malinda Albert Kabalana's journey in the afterlife, between flashbacks of his life and directing Jaki to his photographs through her dreams. It exposes how spectral temporality disrupts the notion of linear time, as Karunatilaka emphasises the haunted continuation of war declared “over” by the government. Consequently, the paper examines the novel through the pivotal lens of hauntology and spectrality, uncovering the composite appearance of the spectral within it.

Thus, the theoretical confluences of haunting, temporal spectrality and disappearance illuminates Karunatilaka's critique of cultural amnesia and systemic violence in a nation torn by decades of ethnic and civil strife. For this reason, this paper explores the ways in which the novel engages with the concept of haunting as resistance against forgetting in conflict-ridden Sri Lanka. It follows traces of absent presences by interrogating the ways in which Sri Lanka's ghosts demand reclamation of silenced events and delayed justice.

Haunting as Resistance: Absent Presences, Traces and Disappearance

Abound in *The Seven Moons* is a fixation on death as a stand-in for confronting the spectral matters at play in light of the Sri Lankan civil war. Haunting in the novel functions as a weapon, granting the dead greater political agency than the living since they have nothing left to lose. This inversion underscores the novel's structuring principle – where Avery Gordon claims that “haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening” (8); Karunatilaka depicts that this knowledge is strategically weaponized rather than operating passively. This indicates that the ghosts do not merely embody historical injustices or tragedies, they compel the living to confront crimes that the Sri Lankan government refuses to recognize. In addition, encountering these ghosts may provoke a

renewed connection with the present (Holloway and Kneale 298). In *The Seven Moons*, the ghosts are ever present and command undivided attention. As Gordon asserts, “ghosts are characteristically attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place; by nature they are haunting reminders of lingering trouble” (xix), but in Karunatilaka’s imagination, they emerge not just as reminders but more importantly, accusers. They haunt the spaces once traversed by their corpses, and through this spatial inhabitation, they mark their presence upon the nation’s very geography. Karunatilaka provides visibility to that which is prohibited, that absent presence punctuated by state sponsored terror by allowing us to engage with what has been erased from public memory. In fact, *The Seven Moons* is an official enquiry into ghostly haunting, not only through the gay gambler-photographer, Maali, but also through the characters of Dr. Raneer Sridharan, the JVP Marxist Sena, and the “In-Between’s most powerful being” (Karunatilaka 318), Mahakali. Each embodies a different mode of spectral resistance: Dr. Raneer by way of ethical refusal, Sena by revolutionary insistence, the Mahakali through forcing visibility, and Maali by penetrating the living’s unconscious.

The ghosts in the liminal space of the In-Between refuse to move towards ‘the Light’, “Even the afterlife is designed to keep the masses stupid...they make you forget your life and push you towards some light. All bourgeois tools of the oppressor. They tell you that injustice is part of some grand plan. And that’s what keeps you from rising against it” (11). Calling their life before death in Sri Lanka their “pre-liminal stage” (86), Raisun Mathew asserts that this overcrowded and despairing state of the In Between simply mirrors the fears and the anxieties of their forgotten existence in war zones of Sri Lanka. This interpretation, however, ignores the active refusal that is at stake. The ghosts’ presence in this liminal space transcends mere suffering by further embodying resistance, a refusal towards a second disappearance. At the Borella Kanatte cemetery, the dead Maali sees “spirits as anonymous and as forgotten as they were in life” (Karunatilaka 41), yet it is precisely their anonymity that materializes their

power. Their occupation of the purgatory of the lost emerges as an act of resistance against forgetting, of remembering, of “bringing to mind a preserved representation that is both a copy of, and caused by, a previous perception” (De Brigard 403) of their traumatic pre-liminal stage. In this manner, haunting in *The Seven Moons* functions as a mode of mnemonic resistance wherein the ghosts of the In-Between inscribe their past injustices and suffering into their present liminal state, demanding both the living and the dead to face otherwise forgotten and suppressed histories. Karunatilaka partakes in “following marks and traces to tell the story of absences felt as presences [by] conjuring subjects who have been excluded, their histories and subjectivities repressed” (Van Wagenen 290). They do not seek to be forgotten quietly; they demand violent acknowledgement.

This tension propels one of the most critical exchanges within the novel. When Sena shouts to the crowd in the afterlife, “Many of you were killed. Many of you were driven to kill themselves...Maybe it is easier to forget. But forgetting cures nothing. Wrongs must be remembered” (Karunatilaka 93), his words echo the collective trauma of those who suffered, emphasizing that obliteration of memory perpetuates injustice. However, it is equally imperative to note Dr. Ranees’s words as she says, “Revenge is no justice. Revenge lessens you” (93). She highlights the ethical complexity of seeking retribution, her words emblematic of the catastrophic state of the Sri Lankan nation, exacerbated by cycles of vengeance. Karunatilaka takes no sides, he provides to the reader a multifaceted understanding of the violence inflicted by all sides in the war. The narrative reveals that haunting engages itself precisely in this landscape of irresolution where the dead fail in achieving closure and the living in granting justice. They remain trapped in a state of confrontation deliberately produced by the government through acts of erasure. The novel explicitly underscores this by stating that the victims of the 1983 massacre roam the In Between, “...working against The Light...against the forgetting” (Karunatilaka 95), their traumatic reality underscored by conceding that “1983 was an atrocity. eight thousand homes, five thousand shops, a hundred

and fifty thousand homeless, no official body count. The Sri Lankan government has neither acknowledged nor apologized for it” (107). In a nation that holds no official account, its ghosts constitute the historical records.

For Maali, who remains disappeared for his mother, his lover DD, and his best friend Jaki until proof of his death is brought to them, his existence turns paradoxical. He remains neither fully alive nor conclusively dead, merely existing as a spectral figure whose absent presence and traces seek to haunt the memories of his loved ones. In fact, in the hybrid subjectivity and perspective of the narrative (presence), Maali’s absence and presence combine as trauma, the ghostly (absence) and death are demonstrated and re-experienced (Lim 5). Proclaiming that Sri Lankans have grown accustomed to waiting for the missing, De Alwis begets the following question, “Does one mourn permanent absence of presence or a temporary one which nevertheless carries with it its own anxieties and fears for any moment that absent presence could be made permanent?” (379). In this novel about “historical ‘haunting’” (Kirss 33), the Sri Lankan state’s bureaucratic practice of disappearance actively generates the very grounds for haunting. Those ensnared in this limbo serve as conduits for the political demands of the dead. For instance, the half-Burgher half-Sinhalese Malinda Albert Kabalana’s mother resolves to deal with Detective Cassim and ASP Ranchagoda as they refuse to file a report for three days since the missing in Sri Lanka cannot truly be considered ‘missing’ until seventy-two hours. The reader is alerted to the fact that Colombo’s police stations for the past year have “entertained wailing parents inquiring after sons and daughters who never came home” (Karunatilaka 46). This incident echoes a state of constant uncertainty experienced by those left behind following their loved one’s disappearance, the absence of a grave or body trapping them in a space where the process of mourning is denied to them since there lies no tangible concern to work upon (Gatti and Peris Blanes 57). In such a condition, the very impossibility of mourning transforms into fuel for haunting. Moreover, the quest of the lamenting mother within the narrative evokes the grief of countless mothers

whose “endless tracings and re-tracings...articulates a subtle layering of temporalities through the trace of the ‘disappeared’—his face—which appears to her wherever she goes, at whatever she looks” (De Alwis 381). Maali’s mother embodies this haunting by navigating a bureaucratic apparatus designed to conceal rather than expose. By refusing the state’s silence, she is strongly overtaken by her son’s absence and in the process, she transforms into an agent of spectral resistance. Not only that, it is in fact her grief which is weaponized into demanding truth.

Furthermore, Maali is a victim of state torture who, even in the afterlife, is headed towards a motive that never reaches fruition—never truly materializes. Eventually moved towards the Light, he finds the gallery exhibiting his photographs empty. Though, in the process, he appears to have a gripping effect on his best friend Jaki, who essentially loses him but gains his ghost (particularly through her dreams). Unconsciously, she acts as a stealthy accomplice in the absent present Maali’s own plan to expose his photographs. It is through her that the more radical haunting in the narrative takes place. Jaki’s attempt to mourn Maali’s death is indicated through a special unapproved report she delivers that gets her fired from the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. However, mourning him is not her choice, she is seized by his haunted presence, obliged to act on his behalf because he no longer possesses a body that could act for him. Together, both Jaki and Maali’s mother serve as active participants in “potentially demanding state accountability or demonstrating state inaction” (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 82). In a manner, they revere the memory of their lost loved one by relentlessly insisting on the truth of his ‘disappearance’. Yet, their actions are not so much a consequence of their own socio-political agency as much as their possession by spectrality, signifying that the ghosts in the novel propel the living towards justice.

Spectral Temporality: Fractured Time and Memory's Ruptures

In Karunatilaka's novel, Sri Lanka itself functions as a spectral space within the narrative—a nation haunted by the victims of its bloody past and present. The declaration, “Most Lankans are silent seethers” (2), at the very onset of *The Seven Moons* subsequently lays the groundwork for understanding the collective trauma of Sri Lankan civilians. This silent seething for Lankans is mandated, characteristic of the suppressed grief and anger that pervades the social fabric of the country. While the state commands temporal continuum, the ghosts assert cyclical return, revealing the nation's post war structure. As per Gordon, seething “makes a striking impression... [it is] charged with the occluded and forgotten past” (195). Sri Lanka's function as a spectral space, defined by Chia-Sui Lee “as an actual living place – a place, location, or landscape – that is characterized by the features of the specter” is reflected “as a space of heterogenous time, a space of fluidity, and a space of uncanny-ness” (2016, 22). The narrator observes, “you look down the line of traffic and see a ghoul on every car roof” (Karunatilaka 27), reinforcing the trauma narrative's insistence on the haunting presence of war-related experiences (Valančiūnas 38). Thus, the country is bound with its social and historical influences, its haunted quality consequently exhibiting the catastrophic impact of a prolonged war on the nation's collective consciousness, and the wounds intertwined with its cultural fabric. In the section *Chat with Dead Bodyguard (1959)*, Maali's interaction with the Minister Cyril Wijeratne's shadow on the flags of Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam, both of which depict a beast, chronicles the traumatic imprints of violence and bloodshed. The flags themselves take shape as historical documents, representing not national identity but national trauma fixed into symbols – “Eelam has the tomato red of a flesh wound, Lanka has the plum maroon of an unhealed scar...As if to acknowledge that Lanka was founded on bestiality and bloodshed” (Karunatilaka 138). Thus, spectral temporality's logic within the narrative unfolds with the past's refusal to recede; instead, it is memorialized in national records. Its refusal of temporal continuity is further crystallized through the two

national flags.

Likewise, the ghosts exemplify the impossibility of linear temporality itself, they themselves remain haunted, by their forgotten and unresolved pasts. They are at work, the work of mourning their systemic deaths, and thus persist in the liminal space of the purgatory demanding justice instead of walking towards their ultimate destination—the Light. Their haunting materializes ‘Down There’ as they make the present tremble by whispering thoughts into the ears of the living. The protagonist Maali notes, “Every person you see has a spirit crouching behind them...a few have devils squatting on their shoulders and filling their ears with bile” (197). Here, the ghosts’ power to haunt in Karunatilaka’s work takes an altogether different turn by allowing them to influence reality itself. They politically claim the present, reframing how it is experienced by the living. This mythical and magical realist backdrop of the novel encapsulates “the island’s inability to find peace by overcoming the unrest [which] 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” (Saha & Ghosh Sarbadhikary 9). Through their spectral force, the ghosts render impossible the state’s desire for amnesia.

Recontextualizing Derrida’s notion of spectrality articulated in *Specters*, which points out that “the world is going badly” (96), one discerns how time appears to be *out of joint*,⁶ both within the novel and the island nation. The past remains constantly at work in the present, which results in a disruption in linear temporality. Meanwhile, the spatial and the temporal in *The Seven Moons* is impacted by deep-seated traumas, its ghostly shadow evokes specters in a manner that distorts how we perceive and distinguish time. Fisher captures this, stating that “haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space...when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time” (19). In the novel, the In-Between is a space where the past, the present and the future collapse into one singular, temporal moment, creating an impression of timelessness. It is the fluidity of time that allows Maali to encounter ghosts from distinct

points in Sri Lanka's past, each bringing with them their oppressed pasts, and their own experience of the island's violent conflict. These ghostly entities function as conduits for providing deeper insight into the lasting trauma of ethnic strife, colonialism and civil war. Their past, a residue of political violence, entirely rejects linearity and is available for the living to encounter whilst existing as history. The ghosts of Sri Lanka's past continue to operate in the present, they insist on closure, and are reminders of what needs to be addressed and resolved in a country where justice is perpetually delayed. They manifest as wholly existent and animated figures that challenge the living head-on, unmediated, and at times in a threatening manner (Lincoln and Lincoln 198). Although imperceptible to the world of the living, they command influence over it by compelling its people to recognize their vital presence. More crucially, what becomes apparent in the afterlife "subordinated to the Buddhist laws of cyclicity and rebirth is the unrelenting spectacle of violence, the unending aspect of history seen as a repetition of scenarios of oppression" (Łukaszyk 165-66).

Furthermore, Maali's story demonstrates this temporal rupture itself. It unfolds through flashbacks, a consequence of his fractured memory – the setting continuously shifts back and forth in time, breaking away from traditional linear structures, which appears to be a temporal loop in itself. His memory surfaces sporadically throughout the novel, coming back to him through bodily sensation, in "itches and aches" (Karunatilaka 24) rather than cognitive recall, as he conjures up his childhood, his relationships, and the horrors he documented. It's almost as if when he is "individually remembering, [he is] recalling the memories of a social community" (Brockmeier 24) – that of Sri Lankans. Karunatilaka corroborates this process of remembrance as a narrative practice surrounded by Sri Lankan history. In "Remembering and Forgetting: Narrative as Cultural Memory", Jens Brockmeier suggests that the act of remembering and forgetting takes "place along the paths laid out by certain cognitive structures or frames of memory. And because these frames are defined by a culture, we always carry the memories of this culture, even if they appear to be most private" (24).

Through witnessing acts of war, Maali is further entwined with Sri Lanka's historical narrative. Here, as Maali fails to separate the nation's past with his own death, the personal and the political remain one. His attempts at piecing together the circumstances leading to his death are shown as simultaneously revealing the broader narrative of Sri Lanka's historical violence. In doing so, the author enables us to "grasp more complex temporal trajectories, such as the multi-layered scenarios of time that are evoked in our remembrance" (Brockmeier 34). At the onset, Maali observes:

Memory comes to you in bodily ailments. In sneezes, in aches, in scratches and in itches... Memories come to you in gasps and chokes and loose motions. They happen 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 (35).

It then follows that the categories of time – past, present, and future—are not distinctly marked in the novel, and this temporal blurring becomes particularly apparent when the memory is concerned with a significant event, which in Maali's case integrates the personal and the political. For the reader, Maali's perspective reflects a past simultaneously relived as opposed to being passively recalled, indicating how certain moments in the nation's history defy fading in time.

Mnemonic Triggers: Photography, Place, and the "Dark Heart of Lanka"

In *The Seven Moons*, the figure of Mahakali emerges as a mnemonic trigger that compels the reader and the protagonist to grapple with Sri Lanka's past. Enforcing memory, her function is destructive rather than restorative, and she ensures that forgetting is rendered impossible. She is portrayed as a beast, a spectral figure with the "head of a bull on the body of a bear" (39), whose proximity drives Maali to remember. Upon confrontation with the "demon of a thousand faces", "the keeper of the skulls", "the dark heart of Lanka" (318),

Maali is led toward what has been erased from his memory. The figure typifies the In-Between's "most potent" (148) aspect of the uncanny, based on Freud's sense of the term. Not only does she represent the uncanny in her outward appearance but also in underlying function. Her mere presence unsettles Maali and the helpers of the In-Between, bringing in "a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting" (Gordon 65), whilst trapping souls in its belly. However, it is the sound that terrifies more, the screams of souls "caked in fear, imprisoned in flesh, like souls beyond help" (Karunatilaka 95). Her monstrosity can be seen as her force, she is the embodiment of obliteration and justice for those lingering in the In-Between, a catalyst for both terror and truth. In fact, her existence serves as the physical evidence of the war's violence, triggering acknowledgement.

It is owing to Mission Kuveni, Sena's grand plan of ending violence through violence, that "the horror of annihilation is raised fully into consciousness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 178) in the novel. This plan may be deliberately regarded as the critical moment where the author compels the readers to utterly confront the horrors of revenge and destruction. However, for Sena and his followers, it symbolizes the hope that there still exists an opportunity to fight for justice, for those oppressed, murdered and forgotten. Suggesting that justice demands brutality, Sena positions the Mahakali as a being that "soothes those who suffer, absorbs their pain" (Karunatilaka 318). Karunatilaka's description of Mission Kuveni parallels Adorno and Horkheimer's proposition that only by fully withstanding the terror of destruction "are we placed in the proper relationship to the dead: that of unity with them, since we, like them, are victims of the same conditions and of the same disappointed hope" (178). Mahakali's alliance with Mission Kuveni expedites her function as a mnemonic trigger. On the other hand, Maali refuses to be haunted by being involved in the same, his viewpoint reveals the narrative's political position:

'These men deserve to die. But does the woman outside who just made you tea? Do all

those people downstairs? Do you? [...] We send pawns to kill kings. But bad kings get

replaced by worse kings, and more pawns get sent to die [...] These are not combatants, malli. Boys like you blow themselves up. And what changes? Is your life worth sacrificing, even for this scum? Is hers? Are theirs?' (Karunatilaka 350).

Here, the trap for the ghosts becomes evident, as in destruction, they replicate the state's violent logic. It showcases that haunting as resistance is not the same as resistance through violent methods.

Furthermore, the spectral landscape of *The Seven Moons* transcends its ghosts, incorporating 'sites of death' such as the Palace and Beira Lake. These locations signify murder, torture and disappearance, thereupon functioning as sites of mass violence where its spectral aftermath persists, despite the state's attempts at erasure. Maali details the Beira Lake's history— "Corpses of traders, sailors, prostitutes, gangsters and innocents lie rotting in its belly...[it] smells like a powerful deity has squatted over it, emptied its bowels in its waters, and forgotten to flush" (16). The stench is far from incidental, the bodies decay in water, yet they remain. The lake retains what the government sought to erase, making its presence clear through senses. Dylan Trigg in "The Place of Trauma: Memory, hauntings, and the temporality of ruins" delegates the word 'ruins' specifically to that "location of memory, in which trauma took place and continues to be inextricably bound with that location in both an affective and evidential manner" (88). His perception of spectrality considers that the ruin's ability to "haunt the viewer effectively undercuts a claim of temporal continuity" (89), which manifests effectively in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Karunatilaka successfully fulfils the task of synchronizing the traumatized Maali with the traumatized Beira Lake. The lake haunts because it carries evidence of war crimes. In fact, it is in witnessing his own dismembering that Maali is overcome with the burden of its history. By way of synchronizing the individual self and the haunted landscape of Beira Lake, the narrative offers to the reader a profound critique on historical violence, the tenacity of memory and the ever-present spectral forces of Sri Lanka. Although unaware of the events leading up to his death, Maali is horrified

by the sight of Balal and Kottu trying to dispose of his corpse, “Your body has been chopped at the spinal cord, as has that of the other corpse whose face you cannot see” (Karunatilaka 21). This moment in the narrative captures the confluence of personal and political tragedy, transfiguring Maali’s death into an extension of the bloody war. It also crystallizes the state’s attempts at making the dead indistinguishable. Both Beira Lake and the Palace disrupt the conventional notion of time as linear. As opposed to depicting a seamless, sequential timeline, the haunting quality of these sites suggests temporal discontinuity laden with gaps. In doing so, the ruins express an alternative narrative—one defined by absent presences and the past’s pervasiveness in the present. The Palace, a site of institutional torture and abduction, is where “cultural memory comes into being through cultural amnesia” (Gwin 6). Its rooftop is where the Mahakali resides, converging trauma and justice, since “there is no reason for it to ever leave” (Karunatilaka 317), symbolizing the loss of life. Capitalizing on Gordon’s assertions on disappearance, one might contend that the Palace possesses secret state knowledge, its very existence “terrorizes a nation’s population to a large extent” (79) through the paradox created by such a public secret. Its haunting makes the past present in the very landscape of Colombo, resisting amnesia.

Finally, Maali’s camera together with his photographs act as mnemonic triggers both for him and the nation’s structural amnesia, thus fulfilling the system of haunting as resistance against forgetting. In the afterlife, it is precisely when he holds his damaged camera to his face that he starts to recollect his life, although traumatic, memories. At one point, he holds his Nikon camera to his face and recalls the repercussions of the shelling at Kilinochchi: “You see the dead after the shelling... a broken dog, a bleeding man, a mother and child. You took this photo from the top of a crumbling building, and as you watch a hole grows larger in your stomach...It is not the most gruesome photo in your box by a long stretch, but for some reason for you it is the saddest” (Karunatilaka 37). The photograph resists any abstraction whatsoever, compelling the viewer to confront the particular moment, the particular dead. Its

force lies in the specificity of loss rather than the enormity of horror. The photograph then operates as a *punctum*, in the sense outlined by Roland Barthes. For Gordon, the *punctum* is simply “what haunts...the detail, the little but heavily freighted thing that sparks the moment of arresting animation, that enlivens the world of ghosts” (108). Likewise, although Maali’s motive of ending wars through his photographs is never achieved, their mere existence resist erasure. In fact, he himself remarks, “I was there to witness. That is all. All those sunrises and all those massacres existed because I filmed them. Now, they are dead as me” (Karunatilaka 242). Building on Susan Sontag’s notion, Judith Butler asserts that “photographic evidence has become all but obligatory to demonstrate the fact of atrocity—which means that in this instance photography is built into the case made for truth” (81). However, in Sri Lanka’s controlled landscape, this photographic evidence is suppressed too. Maali’s photographs do not end up shaking the world, they don’t burst the Colombo bubble, and he finds that they attract more ghosts than humans but they manage to gather slight public attention. He watches in silence “as photos of dead journalists, kidnapped activists and beaten priests are erased from...walls, along with exploded planes, dead villagers and rabid mobs” (Karunatilaka 380). The political outrage that he awaited and that Butler broaches, never occurs. It leads us to question the ability of photographs to bring about socio-political shifts in societies where narratives and photography itself is regulated by the state. However, they haunt the memory archive, and the dead that are subjects of testimony just the same.

Together, Mahakali, sites of death, and Maali’s photographs constitute a singular network of resistance. It is through their persistent presence and not political triumph that they forestall forgetting, and insist on haunting the present. In Karunatilaka’s narrative, haunting is perceived not as resolution but as disruption, a refusal towards systemic amnesia.

Conclusion

In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Shehan Karunatilaka utilizes literal ghosts, ghouls, yakas, pretas, and demons to highlight the repressed trauma and violence suffered by the island nation of Sri Lanka throughout the twenty-six-year long civil war. This paper utilizes the theories of hauntology and spectrality to underscore how haunting functions as a narrative of resistance in the novel; it highlights the presence of lingering absent presences, their traces and the state-sponsored terror of disappearance in Sri Lanka. It also explores the notion of Sri Lanka as a spectral space in itself, haunted by decades of war, founded on bloodshed. Approaching disappearance as a state that induces perpetual anxiety in the families and loved ones of the disappeared, it makes clear that the absence of a tangible dead body traps them in unresolved and unacknowledged grief, denying them the healing process of mourning. Avery Gordon suggests that the presence of a ghost indicates that haunting is occurring at any given moment—haunting of a social entity, not merely a deceased person. She maintains that investigating the ghost can lead the scholar to that site where personal subjectivity and historical events intertwine to shape social life. Meanwhile, Jacques Derrida's theory of spectrality contemplates the presence of ghosts in relation to justice, asserting that their existence, however spectral, produces material effects in society, symbolizing the past's influence over the present. The novel highlights how time appears to be out of joint in the island, particularly drawing attention to it as a space where the present, past and future collapse into one singular moment. Finally, the paper examines distinct mnemonic triggers throughout the novel, such as the figure of Mahakali, particular 'sites of death', and Maali's camera as evoking remembrance and challenging erasure. The terrifying figure of Mahakali is interpreted as a catalyst for forcing the protagonist and the reader to confront that which has been suppressed in the history of Sri Lanka's civil war. It finds that sites such the Palace and Beira Lake challenge the linear understanding of time by way of being haunted, evoking a sense of fragmented temporality. Simultaneously, Maali's damaged camera and his box of

photographs function as memory prompts, awakening both individual and collective history.

Consequently, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* operates as an investigation on the power of absent presences, memory, and acts of resistance. Without leaning towards any political sides, it seeks to highlight that in death, everyone looks the same. It refrains from offering any facile resolutions regarding the ethical complexities surrounding vengeance and justice. It does so through Mission Kuveni, the figure of Mahakali, and by putting figures like Dr. Raneer, the JVP Marxist Sena and Maali together in conversation in the afterlife. In addition, it compels one to beg the following question – how can the potential of photography to incite socio-political action within societies where both narrative discourses and the photographic medium are methodically controlled by the state be interrogated?

Notes

1. The protracted strife profoundly affected not only the Tamil minority but also the Sinhalese majority and the Muslim population in Sri Lanka, aggravating socio-political and ethnic tensions across the nation until its violent end in 2009.
2. The 1990 ‘Eviction’ of Muslims from the north by the LTTE marked a pivotal moment in intensifying Tamil-Muslim tensions. This act of ethnic cleansing was more than just a strategical move; it was also a reflection of growing fractures between the two communities that lived as neighbours in certain parts of Sri Lanka. Although, historically they peacefully coexisted, especially in the north, their forced displacement strengthened their marginalization, adding to the larger patterns of violence and exclusion during & after the war. Furthermore, the experiences of the new population of evicted people called Northern Muslims as a second minority have been neglected not merely as a result of silence from the affected but also because overarching narratives of the conflict centre on Sinhala and Tamil populations, constraining the understanding of the Sri Lankan civil war (Thiranagama 2011).

3. Believing it to be an ephemeral dream, Maali points out to the woman behind the counter who he then recognizes as the professor assassinated by the LTTE, Dr. Ranees Sridharan, “Look at this crowd. Must be all the killing up north. Tigers and Army killing civilians. Indian peacekeepers starting wars...government is fighting the JVP and bodies are piling high” (6). The figure of Dr. Ranees is inspired by the human rights activist Rajani Thiranagama, who was killed for her active criticism of the Tamil Tigers in September 1989 in Jaffna. Not only that, the protagonist Malinda Almeida Kabalana himself was inspired by the activist and journalist Richard de Zoysa, kidnapped and murdered reportedly by a death squad in 1990.
4. Henceforth, the fictional narrative utilized will be referred to simply as *The Seven Moons* throughout the paper for brevity and clarity.
5. The term “mnemonic”, derived from the Greek word *mnēmonikos* translates to “relating to memory”.
6. Derrida takes the notion of time being “out of joint” from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, specifically Act I Scene V, to denote a present that is essentially disordered.

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