Wounds That Will Not Heal: Trauma, Memory, and Spectral Historiography in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

DISSERTATION

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FATHIMA S

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Candidate Code : 53024142006

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

T.K.M COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

KOLLAM - 691005

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Wounds That Will Not Heal: Trauma, Memory, and Spectral Historiography in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*** is a record of the studies carried out by **FATHIMA S.**, at the Department of English, T.K.M. College of Arts and Science, Kollam under the guidance of **Dr. Shafana Shaffi** and submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature.

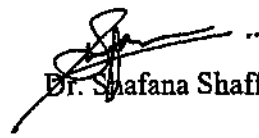


Dr. Shafana Shaffi

Assistant. Professor in English

T.K.M. College of Arts and Science

Kollam



Dr. Shafana Shaffi

Head, Department of English

T.K.M. College of Arts and Science

Kollam

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **Wounds That Will Not Heal: Trauma, Memory, and Spectral Historiography in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*** submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature is the original record of studies and research carried out by me during 2024–2026 under the guidance of Dr. Shafana Shaffi, Assistant Professor of English, T.K.M. College of Arts and Science, Kollam and it has not formed the basis for the award of any degree, title or recognition.



Fathima S.

M.A. English

T.K.M. College of Arts and Science

Kollam

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Preface

Trauma, memory, and political violence are among the most urgent concerns of contemporary postcolonial literature, and Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* engages these concerns with formal brilliance and ethical seriousness. Narrated in the second person by the ghost of a dead war photographer navigating the bureaucratic afterlife of 1990 Colombo, the novel refuses to allow Sri Lanka's disappeared to be forgotten, insisting on the claims of the dead upon the living even when the institutions of justice have failed to honour those claims. This project investigates these dimensions through an interdisciplinary framework drawing on trauma theory, memory studies, postcolonial identity theory, historiography, and biopolitical thought.

The research is organised into four chapters. The first chapter, "Introduction," situates the novel within its historical and literary contexts and outlines the theoretical frameworks that guide the study. The second chapter, "Trauma, Memory, and Identity in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*," argues that these are not separate themes but mutually constitutive processes whose entanglement is the novel's deepest subject. The third chapter, "Spectral Histories and Biopolitical Violence: Historiography in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*," examines the novel as a counter-history that challenges official accounts of the conflict and gives narrative form to the biopolitically disappeared. The final chapter, "Conclusion," synthesises the findings of the study and situates the novel within the broader tradition of postcolonial war literature, arguing that speculative fiction has the power not only to document violence but to resist it.

Chapter One

Introduction

Literature has long served as one of the most powerful means through which human societies attempt to make sense of their most extreme experiences. War, with its capacity for destruction that extends far beyond the battlefield into the minds, memories, and identities of those who survive it, has produced some of the most significant literary works in world history. From the ancient epics of Homer and Virgil to the modernist fragmentation of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, from the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez to the postcolonial narratives of Chinua Achebe and Ngozi Adichie, literature has consistently returned to the terrain of conflict not merely to document what happened but to ask the deeper questions that official history refuses to answer: what does violence do to the human self, who is permitted to remember and who is forced to forget, and whose deaths count in the historical record that survives the war. These questions are not peripheral concerns of literary art but its most urgent preoccupations, and they have only grown more pressing in an era in which postcolonial states have inherited both the instruments of colonial violence and the colonial habit of producing official histories that serve the interests of power rather than the claims of truth.

War literature occupies a distinctive place within the broader literary tradition precisely because it confronts the limits of representation itself. Writers who attempt to render the experience of mass violence in language inevitably encounter what theorists of trauma have identified as a fundamental paradox: the most significant events are often the least narratable, and the literary forms adequate to ordinary experience frequently prove inadequate to experiences of extremity. This has produced, across the history of war writing,

a remarkable diversity of formal experimentation—from the documentary realism of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* to the absurdist comedy of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, from the fragmented temporality of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* to the polyphonic testimony of Svetlana Alexievich's oral histories. Each of these formal strategies represents an attempt to solve the same underlying problem: how can literature bear adequate witness to violence that exceeds the ordinary capacities of language and narrative form.

Postcolonial war literature occupies a particularly significant position within this broader tradition. It inherits not only the formal and thematic concerns of war writing in general but the specific political conditions of societies that have passed through colonialism and emerged into independence under conditions that colonial governance itself shaped and distorted. The ethnic conflicts, the institutional violence, the politically engineered amnesia, and the systematic silencing of marginalised voices that characterise many postcolonial wars are not aberrations from a colonial legacy of order and justice but direct extensions of colonial practices of divide-and-rule, racialised governance, and the differential valuation of different populations' lives and deaths. Postcolonial war literature at its most searching engages these conditions not merely as background but as the very subject of its formal and thematic investigations, using the resources of literary art to say what official historical narratives have been constructed to prevent from being said. Works such as Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef*, and Anuk Arudpragasam's *A Passage North* have each, in different ways, used the resources of literary fiction to engage with Sri Lanka's civil conflict and its aftermaths, establishing a tradition of literary witness to which Karunatilaka's novel makes a distinctive and significant contribution.

The development of Sri Lankan English literature in particular reflects the island's complex colonial and postcolonial history. Writing in English by Sri Lankan authors has occupied an ambivalent position within the national literary culture, sometimes regarded with suspicion as a colonial inheritance and sometimes embraced as a means of reaching international audiences with stories that the conflict's political sensitivities made difficult to tell in Sinhala or Tamil within Sri Lanka itself. Early Sri Lankan English writing, often produced by and for an educated elite, tended to avoid direct engagement with the ethnic and political tensions that would eventually erupt into civil war. It was only in the decades following the outbreak of conflict in 1983 that Sri Lankan English fiction began to engage more directly and critically with the violence convulsing the island, producing the body of war literature within which Karunatilaka's work must be situated.

Published in 2022 and awarded the Booker Prize in the same year, the novel is set in Colombo in 1990, at the height of Sri Lanka's civil conflict, a period of overlapping and mutually reinforcing violence in which Tamil militant organisations, Sinhala nationalist forces, JVP insurgents, and state-sponsored death squads collectively produced a landscape of atrocity so extensive that accountability became virtually impossible. Into this landscape Karunatilaka places a dead war photographer who wakes in the afterlife without memory of his own death, given seven moons to reach the two people he loves most and lead them to a cache of photographs documenting the crimes that every party to the conflict would prefer to remain hidden. The novel's premise is fantastical, but its politics are precise, its historical documentation meticulous, and its engagement with the psychic and political consequences of war among the most sustained and searching in contemporary world literature.

Shehan Karunatilaka was born in Galle, Sri Lanka, in 1975 and spent his early childhood on the island before his family relocated, returning later to complete his secondary education in Colombo. He came of age during the very years of the civil conflict that would later become the subject of his fiction, an experience that has shaped his recurring conviction that his generation has an unmet obligation to bear literary witness to a period of Sri Lankan history that official politics has preferred to leave unexamined. He pursued higher education in New Zealand, where he studied and subsequently worked, before relocating across various cities including Singapore and Amsterdam while building a career in advertising. His professional background in advertising and copywriting is evident in the precision and dark wit of his prose style, a sensibility that allows him to handle subjects of considerable horror with a tonal control that avoids both sentimentality and gratuitous shock.

Karunatilaka's debut novel, *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew*, published in 2011 after a long and difficult journey to publication, won the Commonwealth Book Prize and established him as one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary South Asian fiction. The novel, narrated by an alcoholic sports journalist obsessed with tracking down a forgotten and possibly mythical Sri Lankan cricketer, used the structure of a sporting mystery to examine Sri Lankan society, class, ethnicity, and the quieter violence of ordinary life under conditions of political instability. The novel's critical success, though initially modest, grew considerably over the following decade, and it has since come to be regarded as a landmark of contemporary Sri Lankan fiction. The technique demonstrated in *Chinaman*—the deployment of a popular genre framework, narrated by an unreliable and morally compromised narrator, in the service of a serious examination of national history

and identity—anticipates the formal strategy that Karunatilaka would develop with even greater ambition in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*.

Between the publication of his two novels, Karunatilaka continued to write across multiple forms, including journalism, screenwriting, and children's fiction, while developing the manuscript that would eventually become *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. The novel was initially published in India in 2020 under the title *Chats with the Dead* before being substantially revised and republished internationally as *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* in 2022. This revision process, which Karunatilaka has discussed in interviews as involving significant structural and tonal changes, reflects the author's sustained engagement with the question of how best to represent the civil war's violence and its political aftermath. The novel's subsequent Booker Prize victory in 2022—only the second time a Sri Lankan-born writer had won the prize, following Ondaatje's shared win for *The English Patient* in 1992—brought significant international attention to Sri Lankan literature and to a chapter of the country's history that has received insufficient recognition in global literary and political discourse. In his Booker Prize acceptance remarks, Karunatilaka spoke explicitly of his hope that the novel might contribute to a fuller public reckoning with Sri Lanka's civil war, situating his own literary project within the tradition of witness that the present study takes as its central concern.

The historical context within which *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is set requires elaboration if the novel's political and ethical dimensions are to be fully appreciated. Sri Lanka's civil conflict, which formally began in 1983 and ended with the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009, was not a sudden eruption of primordial ethnic hatred but the culmination of decades of politically engineered communal antagonism

rooted in the colonial period. British colonial governance in Ceylon institutionalised ethnic difference through administrative practices of classification and differential privilege that hardened previously fluid social distinctions into rigid communal identities, creating the conditions for the ethnic polarisation that independence would intensify rather than resolve.

The Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which made Sinhala the sole official language of Ceylon and effectively marginalised Tamil-speaking populations from state employment and political participation, is perhaps the most significant postcolonial intensification of these colonial divisions. Its passage marked the consolidation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as the dominant political force in the newly independent state and the formal beginning of a process of Tamil political marginalisation that would eventually produce armed resistance. The Tamil United Liberation Front's shift toward the demand for a separate Tamil state—Eelam—and the subsequent emergence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as the dominant Tamil militant organisation reflected the failure of democratic politics to address the systematic exclusion of Tamil populations from the postcolonial state's benefits and protections.

The Black July pogrom of 1983, in which organised Sinhala mobs killed thousands of Tamil civilians across Sri Lanka with the tacit support of state institutions and the participation of some members of the ruling party, marked the point of no return in the conflict's escalation. It transformed a political conflict over representation and rights into a civil war characterised by mass atrocity, displacement, and the systematic targeting of civilian populations by all sides. The novel is set in 1990, seven years after Black July, at a moment when the conflict had expanded to include not only the Sinhala-Tamil dimension but the JVP insurgency—a Sinhala Marxist uprising that the state suppressed with death

squads responsible for tens of thousands of killings, many of them of young Sinhala men suspected of sympathising with the insurgency. The Indian Peacekeeping Force, deployed to Sri Lanka in 1987 under the terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and withdrawn in 1990, forms a further dimension of the period's violence, having become embroiled in direct combat with the LTTE and contributing its own record of civilian casualties before its withdrawal in the very year in which the novel is set. It is this multiply overlapping landscape of violence—in which Tamil militants, Sinhala nationalists, JVP insurgents, Indian peacekeeping forces, and state-sponsored death squads simultaneously prosecuted different but sometimes intersecting agendas of killing—that Karunatilaka's novel navigates and documents.

The novel's protagonist, Malinda Albert Kabalana—known as Maali Almeida—is a war photographer of Burgher heritage who has spent his career documenting the atrocities committed by all sides of Sri Lanka's civil conflict. When the novel opens, he is dead, his body decomposing at the bottom of the Beira Lake, and he has woken in a bureaucratic afterlife called the In Between, which is populated by the ghosts of thousands of others killed in the conflict. The In Between is governed by its own peculiar cosmology, drawing on Buddhist conceptions of the afterlife while subjecting them to a satirical bureaucratic logic: the dead must navigate a confusing system of helpers, demons, and administrative procedures in order to understand their situation and, eventually, decide whether to move toward the Light or remain among the restless dead.

Maali has no memory of how he died or who killed him; what he knows is that he has hidden a cache of photographs in seven locations around Colombo—photographs that document crimes for which no one has yet been held accountable—and that he has seven

moons, or seven days, to ensure these photographs reach his best friend Jaki and his lover DD before they are discovered and destroyed by the various parties whose crimes they document. The list of suspects who might have wanted Maali dead is, as the novel notes with characteristic dark humour, depressingly long: he has photographed and therefore implicated the Sri Lankan state's death squads, Tamil militant organisations, JVP insurgents, and the shadowy intelligence operatives who move between and sometimes serve multiple sides simultaneously.

The novel follows Maali's attempts to communicate with the living despite the In Between's restrictive rules governing the interaction of the dead with the world they have left behind, his gradual reconstruction of the events leading to his death through fragments of memory that surface unpredictably, and his encounters with the dead who populate the In Between, each carrying their own unresolved experience of violence. Among these encounters are conversations with victims of the 1983 riots, JVP insurgents killed by state death squads, and other casualties of the conflict's many overlapping violences, each of whom contributes a fragment to the novel's broader historical mosaic. Alongside this main narrative, the novel traces the efforts of Jaki and DD to understand what happened to Maali and to honour the legacy he has left behind, navigating their own grief while attempting to locate the photographs whose existence they only partially understand.

The novel's climax brings together the threads of personal loss, political conspiracy, and historical reckoning that have structured its narrative, as the truth of Maali's death becomes entangled with the broader question of whether his photographic evidence will survive to expose the atrocities it documents. Without resolving this question in any straightforwardly redemptive way, the novel insists throughout on the ethical stakes of the

attempt: that the photographs reach someone, that the testimony is offered even if its reception cannot be guaranteed, that the seven moons are used in pursuit of transmission rather than surrendered to despair. The novel's refusal of easy resolution is itself a significant aspect of its historiographical and political argument, a point to which the present study returns in its analysis of the novel's engagement with historiography and biopolitics in Chapter Three.

What distinguishes *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* from other novels dealing with the Sri Lankan civil conflict is not only its historical scope or its political commitment but its radical formal innovation. The novel is narrated entirely in the second person: Maali addresses himself as "you" throughout, a formal choice that enacts at the level of narration the psychic fragmentation and identity crisis that the novel explores thematically. This choice acknowledges that the traumatised self cannot narrate its own experience from a position of mastery or coherence, that testimony under conditions of trauma requires the construction of an external witness within the narrating consciousness itself. The second-person voice draws the reader into an uncomfortable proximity with a narrator who is simultaneously intimate and estranged, whose address implicates the reader in the experience being narrated while maintaining the formal distance of someone who can only approach his own past as though it belonged to another.

The novel also makes extensive use of the thriller genre's conventions—the countdown, the mystery, the race against time—while simultaneously subverting those conventions by refusing the resolution and closure that the genre normally provides. The mystery of who killed Maali is ultimately less important than the question of what his photographs document and whether they will survive to be seen. The countdown of the seven

moons creates narrative urgency while gesturing toward Buddhist cosmological frameworks of time and passage that situate the individual death within a larger structure of communal and spiritual accountability. The ghost story's conventions allow Karunatilaka to literalise the persistence of the unacknowledged dead in a way that is simultaneously fantastical and politically precise: the ghosts who cannot move on are not supernatural anomalies but the inevitable consequence of a society that has refused to mourn and acknowledge its own violence. The novel's comic register, evident throughout in its bureaucratic satire of the afterlife and its protagonist's characteristically wry voice, coexists with its unflinching engagement with atrocity in a manner that has drawn frequent comparison to the tradition of dark satire associated with writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, while remaining distinctively rooted in Sri Lankan idiom, history, and political circumstance.

Critical reception of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* has emphasised its formal innovation, its political commitment, and its contribution to the tradition of South Asian war fiction. Scholars working in postcolonial literary studies have noted the novel's engagement with questions of historical accountability and counter-memory, situating it within a broader literary and theoretical discourse around the politics of witnessing and the ethics of representation in contexts of extreme violence. The novel's treatment of trauma has been read in relation to the broader tradition of trauma fiction, with critics noting the precision with which its formal choices enact the theoretical insights of Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub regarding the inaccessibility and belatedness of traumatic experience. Its engagement with photography as a form of memory and historical witness has been situated in relation to the work of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, both of whom have theorised the photograph's ambivalent relationship to truth, presence, and loss.

The novel's biopolitical dimensions have received attention from critics working at the intersection of postcolonial theory and political philosophy, with readings drawing on the frameworks of Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe to illuminate the novel's treatment of the state's power over life and death and the condition of those whose deaths the state has produced but refuses to acknowledge. Its historiographical politics have been read in relation to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history and Hayden White's account of history as narrative construction, both of which illuminate the novel's challenge to official accounts of the Sri Lankan civil conflict. The subaltern dimensions of the novel—its insistence on giving narrative form to the experiences and testimonies of those whom official history has excluded—have been examined through the frameworks of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose subaltern studies tradition provides the most precise theoretical vocabulary for understanding the novel's historiographical commitments. The present study builds on and extends these critical conversations, bringing trauma theory, memory studies, postcolonial identity theory, and biopolitical thought into sustained dialogue with the novel's formal and thematic dimensions.

The novel's reception following its Booker Prize win extended well beyond the borders of academic literary criticism. International press coverage frequently framed the novel's achievement in relation to Sri Lanka's broader struggle for historical accountability, noting that the prize came at a moment of renewed political crisis on the island, including the 2022 economic collapse and the mass protests that forced the resignation of the sitting president. Commentators observed that the novel's preoccupation with state impunity and the unaccountability of those responsible for civil war atrocities resonated uncannily with the contemporaneous public anger at decades of governmental corruption and

mismanagement, suggesting that the historical conditions the novel anatomises had not been resolved but had instead mutated into new forms of the same underlying political dysfunction. The novel has since been translated into numerous languages and has entered university curricula across the world as a key text in contemporary postcolonial and world literature courses, a development that reflects both its formal sophistication and the urgency of the historical and political questions it raises. Its growing presence within academic literary study provides part of the rationale for the present study, which seeks to contribute a sustained theoretical analysis of a text whose critical reception, while substantial, remains in its early stages relative to the depth of theoretical engagement the novel's complexity warrants.

The present study examines *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* across two analytical chapters. Chapter Two undertakes a theoretically grounded analysis of the novel's engagement with trauma, memory, and identity, arguing that these are not discrete themes but mutually constitutive processes whose entanglement produces the novel's most significant insights into what political violence does to human subjectivity. Drawing on trauma theory, memory studies, and postcolonial identity theory, the chapter reads the novel's formal choices—its second-person narration, its spectral temporality, its photographic imagery—as epistemological enactments of the very ruptures in consciousness, memory, and selfhood that the novel explores, with particular attention to how these dynamics shape not only the protagonist but also the characters of Jaki and DD. Chapter Three turns to the novel's historiographical and biopolitical dimensions, examining how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* presents a varied and unconventional form of historical narration that challenges official accounts of Sri Lanka's civil conflict while

simultaneously engaging with the biopolitical dimensions of state violence. Drawing on Hayden White, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, and the subaltern studies tradition, the chapter argues that the novel constitutes a counter-history that refuses the erasure that biopolitical power requires.

Taken together, these two chapters seek to demonstrate that *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is not merely a distinguished work of contemporary fiction but a significant intervention in the literary and political discourse surrounding postcolonial war, historical accountability, and the ethics of witness. The broken camera that the protagonist carries through the afterlife, the photographs hidden across seven locations in Colombo, and the seven moons that structure the novel's narrative are not simply plot devices; they are the formal embodiment of a conviction that counter-history is not a scholarly exercise but an ethical emergency, and that the act of bearing witness—however belated, however incomplete—remains the most fundamental responsibility of those who have seen what power requires to remain unseen. In a world in which states continue to produce disappeared bodies and to engineer the amnesias that protect their perpetrators, this conviction is not merely literary but political, not merely aesthetic but ethical, and not confined to Sri Lanka but resonant across the many societies in which the machinery of impunity continues to determine whose deaths matter and whose do not.

Chapter Two

Trauma, Memory, and Identity in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

War leaves its most permanent damage not in the landscape it destroys but in the minds of those who survive it. In Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, this damage is rendered visible through a formal and thematic architecture that refuses the consolations of coherent narrative: a dead man who cannot remember his own death, a past that returns only in fragments, and an identity fractured across multiple roles, concealments, and allegiances that the civil war has made irreconcilable. The novel is set in Colombo in 1990, at the height of a conflict in which state-sponsored death squads, Tamil militant violence, and Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) insurgency have produced a landscape of atrocity so extensive that accountability has become virtually impossible. 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 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 powerful figures, while also searching for his killer. Within this landscape, trauma is not an exceptional condition but the defining structure of ordinary experience—the medium through which every character in the novel moves, remembers, and attempts to understand who they are.

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The novel's central insight is that trauma, memory, and identity are not three separate concerns but a single, mutually constitutive crisis. Trauma, as the novel represents it, does not simply injure the individual; it shatters the very structures through which the past is retained and the self is sustained over time. Memory, deprived of the stability that psychological wholeness would provide, becomes a site of fragmentation, contestation, and political struggle—not a private faculty but a social and historical field in which different versions of the past compete for survival. Identity, in turn, cannot achieve coherence when the memory on which it depends is fractured, and when the social conditions of war—ethnic polarisation, homophobia, the criminalisation of witness—impose contradictory and irreconcilable demands on the self simultaneously. The novel captures this recursive entanglement in one of its most resonant formulations: "You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget" (Karunatilaka 169). This is not simply a paradox about memory; it is an account of the entire condition that the novel explores.

Literature has long served as a space in which the psychic and political consequences of violence are given form, and *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* belongs to a tradition of postcolonial war fiction in which formal experimentation is inseparable from ethical commitment. The novel's second-person narration, its spectral temporality, its photographic imagery, and its Buddhist cosmological framework are not decorative choices but epistemological ones—ways of enacting at the level of form the very ruptures in consciousness, memory, and selfhood that constitute the novel's subject. Trauma theory, memory studies, and postcolonial identity theory together provide the analytical vocabulary through which these formal and thematic dimensions can be most fully understood, each

framework illuminating a dimension of the novel's engagement with the human cost of political violence that no single perspective could adequately capture.

The condition of trauma that shapes the novel's entire narrative architecture finds its most precise theoretical articulation in Cathy Caruth's account of traumatic experience in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Caruth argues that what distinguishes trauma from ordinary suffering is not its intensity but its inaccessibility: the traumatic event cannot be fully registered at the moment of its occurrence and therefore returns belatedly, in fragmented and intrusive forms that resist the integration into coherent narrative that ordinary memory permits (Caruth 3). This structural belatedness—what Freud called *Nachtäglichkeit*, or afterwardness—means that the traumatic past does not belong to the past in any stable sense; it continues to press upon the present as repetition rather than recollection, as symptom rather than story. The protagonist's opening condition in the novel—waking in the afterlife without any memory of his own death, his camera broken, his bearings gone—enacts this structure with formal precision. What has happened to him is too overwhelming to be remembered; it can only be circled, approached obliquely, encountered in fragments that surface without warning and recede without resolution.

Dori Laub's theorisation of the "crisis of witnessing" in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* extends Caruth's account by addressing the consequences of trauma for the possibility of testimony itself. Laub argues that trauma destroys the interior witness—the stable self who could observe and later narrate what occurred—because the traumatic event happens outside the boundaries of normal experience, in a space where the subject cannot be fully present in its own moment (Laub 69). The survivor therefore has no secure internal position from which to testify; what can

be offered is not a coherent account but a broken approximation, marked as much by what cannot be said as by what is expressed. The novel's most significant formal choice—its sustained second-person narration, in which the protagonist addresses himself as "you" throughout—is a precise formal response to this crisis. By splitting the narrating self from the experiencing self, the second person constructs an addressable other within a consciousness that trauma has evacuated, making testimony structurally possible even when experiential coherence has been destroyed. The "you" of the narration is not the reader; it is the witnessing self that the protagonist can only reach by speaking to himself from outside.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through trauma, developed in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, provides a framework for understanding the temporal structure of the protagonist's posthumous journey. Acting out is the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes without the critical distance that would allow their integration into a narrative of the past; working through is the ongoing and incomplete process of mourning that acknowledges the past's claims without being captured by them (LaCapra 142–43). The protagonist's seven moons oscillate between these conditions: he returns repeatedly to the fragments of his past life without resolution, yet the countdown imposes a deadline that working through requires. Something must be transmitted before time expires—the photographs must reach the living, the testimony must find its addressee—and this urgency encodes an impulse toward witness that pure repetition cannot sustain. LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement"—the ethical posture that neither collapses into identification with the traumatised nor retreats into analytic detachment (LaCapra 41)—describes the position the novel asks of its reader, drawn into the protagonist's voice through

the second person while being kept from full identification by the strangeness of his spectral condition.

Judith Herman's clinical account in *Trauma and Recovery* identifies the "central dialectic of psychological trauma" as an oscillation between intrusion and constriction—between the overwhelming return of traumatic material and the numbing withdrawal through which the self protects itself from what it cannot absorb (Herman 47). Herman's observation that trauma "arrests the course of normal development" (33), severing the continuity between past and present on which coherent selfhood depends, acquires a literal dimension in the novel's posthumous setting. The protagonist's development has been suspended at the moment of death, yet the psychic work of integration presses on across the seven moons, incomplete and perhaps incompletable. The broken camera he carries—the instrument through which he once organised and processed the violence he witnessed—is a material emblem of this arrested condition: "You are wearing a safari jacket and faded jeans and cannot remember how you got here. There are three chains and a camera around your neck, its lens is smashed and its casing is cracked" (Karunatilaka 2). The destroyed instrument of witness figures the destruction of the witnessing self: trauma has shattered not only the protagonist's capacity for coherent recollection but the very means through which he made sense of the violence surrounding him.

The novel insists that trauma is not only an individual condition but the defining state of an entire society. The afterlife in which the protagonist finds himself is populated by countless others—victims of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, disappeared activists, civilians killed in crossfire—each carrying an unresolved experience of violence that prevents passage toward the Light. Kai Erikson's concept of collective trauma—"a blow to the basic tissues

of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together" (Erikson 154)—captures what this spectral community figures: not merely the accumulation of individual injuries but the rupture of the social fabric through which harm is recognised, named, and mourned. The state's systematic denial of its own violence—the death squads funded through institutional chains that the novel traces with bitter precision—ensures that the collective wound cannot close, because it has never been officially named. The ghosts who cannot move on are not figures of individual psychological fixation; they are the embodiment of a community suspended in a collective acting out it has not yet found the means to work through.

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.

Memory in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* does not restore the past; it reconstructs fragments of it under conditions of urgency, unreliability, and political contestation. Paul Ricoeur's account in *Memory, History, Forgetting* establishes that memory is not a passive retrieval of stored experience but an active practice of employment—an interpretive act in which fragments are configured into narrative by the remembering subject, always from a particular perspective and always with inevitable gaps

and distortions (Ricoeur 22–24). The protagonist does not simply remember his past; he attempts to narrate it, and the difference is precisely the novel's point. His narration is marked by hesitation, contradiction, and the pressure of the present—the countdown of the seven moons, the urgency of the photographs, the grief of the people he has left behind. The most paradoxical formulation of this condition—"You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget" (Karunatilaka 169)—describes not a failure of memory but its fundamental structure as Ricoeur understands it: shaped by desire, distorted by trauma, and always as much about the present condition of the narrator as about the past events it claims to recover.

Maurice Halbwachs, across *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* and the posthumous *La Mémoire collective*, establishes that individual memory is always socially mediated—that "one may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories" (Halbwachs 40). No one remembers alone; recollection is always shaped by the shared narratives, communal silences, and competing testimonies that the social group provides. The novel's polyphonic afterlife gives this sociological insight its literal form. The protagonist's memories of the war are constantly inflected by the competing accounts of the dead who surround him, each carrying a partial and sometimes contradictory version of events that neither confirms nor fully contradicts what he himself recalls. Memory in the novel cannot be stabilised into a single authoritative account because too many voices, too many suppressions, and too many politically motivated silences have shaped what each witness is able to know and able to say.

The photographs the protagonist has spent his career producing are the novel's most significant material site of memory, and his urgent mission to ensure their survival drives the narrative's central action. Pierre Nora's theorisation of *lieux de mémoire* illuminates their function precisely. Nora argues that sites of memory arise when living communities can no longer sustain memory through shared practice and experience and must instead anchor it in material objects, images, and monuments (Nora 7–8). In a country where state violence is systematically denied and where witnesses are killed before they can testify, the photographs must bear the entire weight of historical witness. They document what official narrative erases: the bodies, the perpetrators, the proof of institutional complicity in atrocity. The protagonist's mission is not merely personal; it is a recognition that material evidence must preserve what living testimony cannot, in a society that destroys its witnesses before they can speak.

Roland Barthes's phenomenological analysis of photography in *Camera Lucida* reveals the temporal paradox at the heart of this photographic archive. The photograph, for Barthes, attests to a "That-has-been"—it is a "certificate of presence" for what is now irretrievably absent (Barthes 87). Each image certifies that the violence occurred, that these people existed, that these deaths happened. But this certificate of presence is simultaneously a certificate of absence—of the dead, of the context surrounding them, of the justice that never came. Barthes further distinguishes between the *studium*—the photograph's legible, culturally coded meaning—and the *punctum*, the detail that exceeds coding and wounds the viewer with the force of the irreducibly particular (Barthes 27). The photographs in the novel carry both dimensions: their *studium* is the political evidence they provide, but their *punctum* is the individual life inscribed in each image—the particular face or gesture that resists

abstraction into a general account of atrocity. The novel affirms the ethical imperative of this particularity: "every death is significant, even when every life appears not to be" (Karunatilaka 375).

The political dimension of memory in the novel finds its sharpest expression in the treatment of forgetting. Andreas Huyssen, in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, argues that the erosion of historical memory is not a natural condition of modern life but a politically engineered one, serving the interests of those who benefit from the disappearance of violent histories (Huyssen 7). The movement toward the Light in the novel—which demands the relinquishment of memory as the condition of passage beyond the afterlife—literalises this political dynamic with considerable force. To enter the Light is to release the photographs, to abandon the testimony, to complete the erasure that the state has already begun. The ghosts who refuse to forget and refuse to move on are therefore figures of political resistance: a spectral counter-archive maintained against the will of power, keeping open the wound that official narrative requires to be closed. Jay Winter's argument in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* that effective mourning requires cultural forms deeper than official commemoration—ritual, narrative, communal witness—finds its embodiment in the novel's Buddhist cosmological framework, which structures the obligation of witness within a register of spiritual and communal accountability that secular bureaucratic forms cannot provide (Winter 9–10).

Identity in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is never a stable possession but always a process of negotiation between what one is, what one performs, and what the social world demands. Stuart Hall's theorisation of cultural identity in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" establishes that identity is not something one possesses or discovers but something one is

always in the process of becoming—"always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 222). Identity is produced through history, power, and cultural discourse, and is therefore subject to constant negotiation rather than resting on any stable or essential ground. The novel announces this condition from its opening page, presenting the protagonist not as a unified self but as a set of competing roles: "Maali Almeida. Photographer. Gambler. Slut." (Karunatilaka 1)

The laconic list refuses hierarchy; none of these roles is more essentially the protagonist than the others. Identity, here, is multiple and irresolvable, produced through the sum of practices and positions rather than residing beneath them as a fixed core. The novel deepens this when it asserts: "You are not the you that you think you are. You are everything you have thought and done and been and seen" (Karunatilaka 356). Selfhood is not interior and essential but cumulative and relational, shaped as much by historical circumstance and social constraint as by anything that might be called individual nature.

In the novel, the metaphor of the sleeping lion is repeated and it represents the peace-loving Sinhala Buddhists. 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?'" (Karunatilaka

232), can proudly proclaim "'A Sri Lankan.'" (Karunatilaka 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, 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.

Homi K. Bhabha's theorisation of the Third Space of enunciation in *The Location of Culture* provides the framework for understanding the protagonist's structural position in the novel's social and political landscape. The Third Space is not a comfortable middle ground between fixed identities but a site of ambivalence and negotiation where cultural meanings are translated, contested, and transformed, and where hybrid identity—neither a synthesis of its components nor a return to prior authenticity—unsettles the binary oppositions through which dominant culture organises belonging (Bhabha 38). The protagonist occupies this space in multiple registers simultaneously: he photographs all sides of the war without committing to any, he is Burgher in an ethnically polarised conflict, queer in a homophobic society, a witness in a country that kills its witnesses. His refusal of fixed belonging—captured in his note to a foreign journalist that "the goons work for the goon-master, who is hired by the cops on the instruction of the task force, which is funded by the ministry, that answers to the Cabinet" (Karunatilaka 20)—grants him the photographer's epistemological

advantage of the outsider who sees what committed insiders cannot. But it also renders him unintelligible and therefore mortal to every side of the conflict.

One of the inducers of Maali Almeida's 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." (Karunatilaka 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.

The most intimate dimension of the protagonist's identity—his queerness—introduces a further and specifically embodied form of social pressure that the novel treats not as incidental but as central to its exploration of selfhood under conditions of violence. Judith Butler's theory of performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of*

Identity holds that gender and sexual identity are not expressions of a prior interior truth but are constituted through the stylised repetition of acts that produce the effect of an essential self they appear merely to reveal (Butler 140). There is no authentic identity beneath the performance; the performance is the only mode through which identity becomes socially legible. In Colombo of that time, a queer man cannot afford visibility in any dimension of his life that might attract scrutiny. His relationship with Jaki encodes this performative necessity: "Jaki didn't mind that you disappeared from parties, didn't mind if you talked to boys, though she hated you talking to girls. And Jaki didn't care if you didn't touch her." (Karunatilaka 58)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorisation of the closet in *Epistemology of the Closet* insists that this arrangement is not a private secret but a structural condition of modern social life: "the defining structure for gay oppression" that shapes the conditions of legibility, alliance, and speech for everyone it touches (Sedgwick 71). The closet does not merely conceal identity; it produces it, forcing a constant management of disclosure and concealment that permeates every social interaction. What Sedgwick's framework reveals is the structural parallel between the protagonist's queerness and his photographic practice: both are forms of holding truth that cannot yet be made public. He documents atrocities that the state denies, just as he conceals a sexuality that his society criminalises. His camera and his closet are parallel instruments for bearing witness to what power requires to remain invisible, and both, in the world of the novel, prove fatal.

Erik Erikson's concept of the identity crisis, developed in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, describes the state in which an individual cannot achieve coherent continuity between past, present, and anticipated future—a condition produced when the social frameworks within

which identity has been formed are dissolved by violence, displacement, or rapid historical change (Erikson 128–32). Civil war produces an extreme collective version of this crisis, rendering the ordinary psychosocial work of self-constitution radically precarious for everyone it touches. The protagonist's posthumous condition represents this crisis in its most absolute form: severed from both past and future, stripped of every social context through which identity is normally sustained, unable to act in the world of the living. The novel names this condition without softening it: "Your life is over. Anyone who tells you otherwise is taking you for a ride" (Karunatilaka 89). What the identity crisis in its extreme form reveals is that selfhood is not a private achievement but a social and historical production—one that war dismantles with systematic thoroughness.

Trauma, memory, and identity in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* are mutually constitutive processes whose entanglement produces the novel's deepest account of what political violence does to human subjectivity. Trauma, as Caruth, Laub, LaCapra, and Herman together establish, names the fundamental disruption through which both memory and identity are subsequently shaped: it is the event that cannot be integrated, the wound that returns as repetition, the break in continuity through which the coherent self is undone. Memory, approached through Ricoeur's hermeneutics of reconstruction, Halbwachs's social framing, Nora's material sites, Barthes's photographic semiotics, and Huyssen's and Winter's accounts of the politics of forgetting, emerges as a contested practice whose stakes are inseparable from the political conditions of its production and suppression. Identity, read through Hall's processual account of becoming, Bhabha's theorisation of the Third Space, Butler's and Sedgwick's accounts of performativity and the closet, and Erikson's

psychosocial framework, appears as a site of ongoing struggle between the self's multiple dimensions and the social world's demand for singular, legible belonging.

What the novel finally proposes is that these three processes are recursive and mutually producing in ways that admit no clean resolution. Trauma makes memory fragmentary; fragmented memory makes identity incoherent; the incoherence of identity under conditions of war deepens and compounds the original wound. The seven moons count down not toward recovery but toward a transmission—the photographs passed on, the testimony offered, the haunting continued by other means. The novel offers its own summation of this condition with characteristic economy: "All stories are recycled and all stories are unfair. Many get luck, and many get misery. Many are born to homes with books, many grow up in the swamps of war. In the end, all becomes dust. All stories conclude with a fade to black." (Karunatilaka 146)

The fade to black is not silence. It is the moment at which what the living have refused to acknowledge becomes the responsibility of those who come after—the point at which the broken camera, the hidden photographs, and the unfinished testimony are passed forward into a future that must decide what to do with them. In a society that has criminalised witness and engineered amnesia, the act of passing on—however incomplete, however belated—is the only form of justice the novel can imagine, and the only form it needs.

Chapter Three

Spectral Histories and Biopolitical Violence: Historiography in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

History is never simply what happened. It is always a construction—a selection of events, a prioritisation of certain voices over others, and a suppression of what power finds inconvenient or dangerous to acknowledge. In societies marked by political violence, this constructedness is not an academic concern but a matter of survival: official histories determine which deaths are mourned, which perpetrators are named, and which victims are allowed to exist in public memory. Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* engages this condition directly, presenting a form of historiography that is radically at odds with the official narrative of Sri Lanka's civil conflict. The novel does not write history from above—from the perspective of governments, military commanders, or institutional records—but from below, from the spectral margins of a society in which the state has systematically erased the evidence of its own violence. Its historians are the dead: the disappeared, the massacred, the witnesses silenced before they could speak. Its archive is a cache of photographs hidden before death, its method the afterlife itself.

The novel's unconventional historiographical approach is inseparable from its engagement with what theorists of power and political violence have identified as biopolitics: the state's systematic management, distribution, and termination of life as an instrument of political control. In Sri Lanka as Karunatilaka depicts it, the state does not merely wage war; it determines whose lives are expendable, whose deaths will be recorded, and whose bodies will be recovered. The machinery of state violence—the death squads, the disappeared, the bodies deposited in the Beira Lake—is not a breakdown of political order but its extension by other

means. Understanding the novel's historiography therefore requires attending simultaneously to how it represents the state's power over life and death and to how its formal and narrative strategies constitute a counter-history that refuses the erasure that power requires.

The interplay between historiography and biopolitics in the novel produces its most distinctive literary achievement: a narrative mode in which the dead do not merely haunt the living but actively contest the historical record, insisting on the particularity of their deaths in a context where the state has invested enormously in their anonymity. The photographs that drive the novel's central plot are not personal mementos but historical documents, and the urgency with which they must reach the living before seven moons expire encodes the novel's deepest conviction: that counter-history is not a scholarly exercise but a political and ethical emergency.

Hayden White, in his foundational study *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, argues that "historical writing is never a neutral transcription of events but a narrative act—a "poetic" construction in which the historian selects, organises, and explores the past according to rhetorical and ideological frameworks that shape what can be seen and said" (ix). History, for White, is always already a form of fiction in the sense that it imposes narrative form on a past that has no inherent shape. The implications of this argument for understanding *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* are considerable. The official history of Sri Lanka's civil conflict—the history produced and sanctioned by state institutions—is precisely such a narrative construction: it selects which events count as history, which deaths are acknowledged, and which perpetrators are named or protected. The novel's counter-narrative is an explicit challenge to this construction, not by claiming a more neutral or transparent access to the past, but by foregrounding the partiality and political investment of all historical narration. Its dead narrator, its fragmented temporality, and its multiple competing

testimonies all refuse the unified, authoritative voice through which official history consolidates its claim to truth.

The novel's most pointed engagement with the constructedness of official history comes in its repeated exposure of institutional complicity in atrocity. The chain of accountability that the protagonist traces—"the goons work for the goon-master, who is hired by the cops on the instruction of the task force, which is funded by the ministry, that answers to the Cabinet, that lives in the house that JR built" (Karunatilaka 20)—is a counter-historical document in miniature: a precise mapping of the institutional architecture through which state violence is organised and then denied. White's insight that history is always written from a position of power, and that alternative histories must contest not only the facts of the dominant narrative but its very narrative logic, is enacted by the novel's insistence on following the chain of causality upward, from the body in the lake to the Cabinet that authorised its disposal. The unofficial history the novel writes is not less constructed than the official one; it is differently constructed, from the perspective of those whom the official version requires to remain invisible.

Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written in 1940 on the eve of his own death at the hands of fascist violence, offers a framework for understanding the novel's historiographical method that goes beyond White's narratological critique. Benjamin argues that conventional historiography is always written from the perspective of the victors: "all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them" and "a historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible" (Benjamin 256). Against this tradition, Benjamin proposes a mode of historical understanding that attends to what he calls the "wreckage" of history—the lives, experiences, and possibilities that have been destroyed in the

name of progress and order. His image of the "Angel of History," facing the catastrophe of the past while being blown helplessly into the future by the storm of progress (Benjamin 257–58), captures precisely the condition of the novel's dead narrator: a witness to wreckage who cannot move forward because there is too much to mourn, and too much that has not yet been acknowledged.

Benjamin's conviction that "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (Benjamin 255) finds its literal embodiment in the novel's treatment of the disappeared. The bodies in the Beira Lake are not simply the casualties of war; they are the targets of a continuing historical violence that seeks to erase not only the lives of the dead but the evidence of their deaths. The state's power extends beyond the moment of killing to encompass the subsequent management of memory: the suppression of evidence, the intimidation of witnesses, the production of official narratives that render the disappeared statistically invisible. The novel's afterlife—in which the dead persist as witnesses precisely because their deaths have not been acknowledged—is a Benjaminian counter-history in fictional form: a narrative mode that refuses to allow the victors' history to stand unchallenged, insisting that the dead retain a claim on the present that the living have not yet honoured. "Many of the victims of the 1983 riots are still roaming the In Between. Their wounds are fresh and their rage is considerable." (Karunatilaka 61)

The rage of the dead is not merely emotional; it is historiographical. It is the refusal of those whom official history has erased to accept their erasure—the insistence that their deaths happened, that they were people, and that the historical record that omits them is a lie that must be contested. Benjamin's call to "blow open the continuum of history" (Benjamin 261)—to

interrupt the smooth narrative of official progress with the suppressed voices of the defeated—is what the novel's dead narrator enacts through the urgency of his seven moons.

Michel Foucault's account of the relationship between power, knowledge, and discourse, developed across *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*, provides a further dimension of the novel's historiographical politics. For Foucault, historical knowledge is never produced outside relations of power; what counts as true, what can be said, and who is authorised to speak are all determined by the "discursive formations" through which a society organises its understanding of itself (Foucault 38). The archive—the body of statements and documents that a society preserves as its official record—is not a neutral repository of the past but a product of power's decisions about what is worth preserving and what must be suppressed. In Sri Lanka as the novel depicts it, the official archive is precisely this kind of political construction: it preserves the narratives of the state and its allies while systematically destroying the evidence of atrocity.

The novel's hidden cache of photographs constitutes what Foucault would recognise as a counter-archive: a body of evidence produced outside the authorised channels of historical knowledge, preserving what the official archive has determined must not be preserved. The photographs document what power has decided will have no record—the faces of perpetrators, the bodies of victims, the proof of institutional complicity in mass killing. Their existence is an act of discursive resistance, a challenge not only to the specific lies of the Sri Lankan state but to the broader Foucauldian claim that power determines the limits of what can be known and said. The protagonist's entire posthumous mission—the seven moons dedicated to ensuring the photographs reach the living—is an attempt to insert this counter-archive into the public discursive field before power can prevent it. His blunt assessment of the conflict he has spent

his career documenting—that there is no point looking "for the good guys, 'cause there ain't none" (Karunatilaka 23)—is itself a refusal of the moral simplifications through which official narrative typically organises historical memory, insisting instead on a more uncomfortable and more accurate distribution of complicity across every faction in the war.

The novel challenges the 'official' histories that assume a linear progression and are driven by objectivity. After the civil war in 2009, the narrative history of the nation of Sri Lanka has been marred by state-sponsored erasures, promoted myths, and glorified retellings. Countering this, Karunatilaka asserts the counter histories of the disappeared, the undocumented photos, and the unsung stories of the silenced, the nameless, and the slain of every side. The novel also depicts the identity of post-conflict Sri Lanka as bound to the politics of remembrance and forgetting. The nation's inability or unwillingness to engage with its history of violence unfolds a landscape of fractured and haunted subjectivities. According to Robben and Nordstrom, "Traumatized communities" are "wracked" by a condition they define as "post memory identities," whereby individuals inherit a "collective trauma" that defines and bounds their self-construct in relation to history (15). In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the city of Colombo transforms into a haunted locale, populated with spectres of unfading memories. Dialogue with these ghostly presences facilitates the construction of Maali's identity. In closing, this novel, along with the preceding discussion, attempts to analyse whether, with all the violence, silence, bitterness, and denial present, a nation's memories can be coherent and whether a stable identity can be achieve.

The concept of biopolitics, first elaborated by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* and *Society Must Be Defended*, describes the modern state's transformation of the management of life and death into a central instrument of political power.

Foucault argues that modern sovereignty operates not only through the traditional power to "make die or let live" but through the new biopolitical power to "make live or let die"—to invest in the life of some populations while abandoning or eliminating others (Foucault, *Society* 241). The state's power becomes, in this account, a power over biological life itself: over the conditions of health, reproduction, and survival of its population, and over the decision about which lives are worth sustaining and which may be expendable. In Sri Lanka as Karunatilaka depicts it, this biopolitical logic is visible in the differential treatment of Sinhala and Tamil populations, in the state's investment in the military apparatus that produces certain deaths, and in the institutional frameworks that protect perpetrators while abandoning victims.

Giorgio Agamben's extension of Foucault's biopolitical framework in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* offers a more precise vocabulary for understanding the condition of the novel's disappeared. Agamben distinguishes between *bios*—qualified political life, life recognised and protected by the political community—and *zoé*, or "bare life": biological existence stripped of political recognition and protection, which can therefore be killed without the killing constituting a crime in any legally or socially meaningful sense (1–2). The figure Agamben calls *homo sacer*—the sacred man of Roman law who could be killed by anyone without legal consequence—names the condition of those who have been excluded from the political community's protection and rendered killable with impunity. The disappeared of Sri Lanka's civil conflict are precisely *homines sacri* in Agamben's sense: their deaths are unacknowledged, their killers unprosecuted, their existence in the political record effectively erased. The bodies deposited in the Beira Lake are the material evidence of a biopolitical decision that certain lives do not count—that they can be terminated without accountability

because the state has already determined that they do not possess the political recognition that would make their deaths legible as murder.

To be forgotten is not merely to be absent from memory; it is to be excluded from the category of lives that matter, to be assigned to what Agamben calls the "state of exception"—the zone in which sovereign power suspends the normal legal and political order and exercises its most naked authority over bare life. The state of exception, for Agamben, is not an emergency measure but the hidden foundation of modern sovereignty: the permanent possibility that the state may determine, at any moment, that certain lives fall outside the protection of law and may be disposed of accordingly (Agamben 168–69). Sri Lanka's civil conflict is not an exception to its political order; it is a prolonged and systematic exercise of biopolitical power over populations that the state has determined are expendable.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, developed in his essay of that title, extends the Foucauldian and Agambenian frameworks by attending specifically to the colonial and postcolonial dimensions of the state's power over death. Mbembe argues that sovereignty, in its most fundamental form, is "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 11). Necropolitics names the political rationality through which certain populations are consigned to what Mbembe calls "death-worlds"—social conditions in which the distinction between life and death has been so thoroughly eroded that survival itself becomes a form of political achievement rather than a given (Mbembe 40). The postcolonial state, in Mbembe's account, inherits and intensifies the colonial apparatus of racialised life-and-death management, producing new configurations of sovereign violence that target populations defined by ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation.

The necropolitical dimension of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is visible in the novel's treatment of the civil war as a systematic and institutionalised distribution of death across ethnic and political lines. The Tamil victims of the 1983 pogrom, the JVP insurgents killed by government death squads, the journalists and activists disappeared for knowing too much—all represent populations that the postcolonial Sri Lankan state has consigned, in Mbembe's terms, to death-worlds: zones in which their lives are available for termination without legal consequence. The protagonist's position as a witness who moves between these populations without belonging to any of them gives him a necropolitical vantage point—the perspective of someone who can see the distribution of death across the social landscape precisely because he is not fully claimed by any single community's survival imperatives. His photographs are necropolitical documents: records of the state's exercise of its power to decide who must die, preserved against the state's subsequent exercise of its power to determine that those deaths never officially occurred.

Mbembe's framework also illuminates the novel's treatment of the afterlife as a space of necropolitical persistence. The In Between is populated by those whom the state's necropolitical machinery has killed but whose deaths have not been acknowledged—whose passage from life to death has been managed in ways that deny them even the minimal recognition of a named, recorded, mourned death. Their inability to move toward the Light figures their exclusion not only from political life but from the social rituals of death itself: they cannot be mourned because they have not been officially killed, cannot be commemorated because their deaths have not been officially recorded. The afterlife in the novel is therefore not a spiritual space but a political one—a necropolitical remainder, the space occupied by those

whose deaths the state has produced but refuses to acknowledge: "The dead outnumber the living in most cities. In Colombo in 1990, the ratio is higher than most." (Karunatilaka 34)

The casualness of this observation—its matter-of-fact statistical register—is itself a historiographical and necropolitical gesture. It normalises the overrepresentation of the dead not as an emergency but as a condition, a structural feature of the city's political life. To say that the dead outnumber the living "in most cities" is to situate Colombo within a broader geography of necropolitical governance, to suggest that what is happening in Sri Lanka is not an aberration but an instance of a more general political rationality that postcolonial states have inherited and reproduced.

The historiographical politics of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is further illuminated by the subaltern studies framework developed by Ranajit Guha and elaborated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Guha's foundational argument in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* is that colonial and postcolonial historiography systematically excludes the experiences and perspectives of those outside the elite—the peasants, the workers, the women, the politically marginalised—whose lives and resistances shape history but are rendered invisible by the archives through which history is constructed (Guha 1–8). Spivak's extension of this argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" insists that this exclusion is not merely a matter of documentary absence but a structural feature of the discursive conditions under which historical knowledge is produced: the subaltern cannot speak within the terms of dominant historical discourse because those terms have been constructed precisely to make subaltern speech unintelligible (Spivak 271–72).

The dead of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* are subalterns in this precise sense: their experiences, their deaths, and their political significance are excluded from the official

historical record not by accident but by design. The Tamil victims of the 1983 pogrom, the JVP activists killed by government death squads, the journalists and photographers who knew too much—all represent populations whose voices official historiography has determined must not enter the historical record. The novel's formal strategy of giving narrative voice to these populations through the afterlife is a direct response to the Spivakian problem: it creates the discursive conditions under which the subaltern can speak, not by pretending that the structural conditions of their silencing do not exist, but by literalising their persistence as ghosts who refuse to accept the silence that power has imposed on them. The In Between is a space of subaltern historiography—a narrative zone in which those excluded from official history insist on their own historical existence.

The protagonist's position as narrator is itself a subaltern historiographical choice. He is not a general, a politician, or an institutional authority; he is a photographer, a gambler, a closeted queer man—someone whose multiple forms of social marginality place him outside the authorised channels of historical narration. His account of the war is not the account of someone with institutional access to power but of someone who has moved through the interstices of power, photographing what those with institutional authority have determined must not be photographed. The novel's subtitle—"Winner of the Booker Prize"—situates this subaltern historiography within the global literary field, suggesting that the counter-history it offers has achieved a recognition that its subjects' lives were denied.

The novel's engagement with historiography is also a postcolonial one, situated within the long aftermath of British colonial rule in Ceylon and the ethnic and political configurations that colonial governance produced and intensified. Homi K. Bhabha's account of colonial discourse in *The Location of Culture* establishes that colonial power operates not only through

military and economic domination but through the production of knowledge—the creation of systems of classification, enumeration, and historical narration that fix colonised populations in particular identities and subject them to particular forms of governance (Bhabha 66–84). The ethnic categories—Sinhala and Tamil—that have been weaponised in Sri Lanka's civil conflict are not primordial but colonial constructions, hardened and politicised through British administrative practices that classified, ranked, and set communities against one another in ways that served the imperial interest in divide-and-rule governance. The civil war that Karunatilaka's novel documents is therefore not only a postcolonial conflict but a colonial inheritance—a violence whose genealogy runs through the administrative histories that official postcolonial nationalism has preferred not to examine.

The novel's historiographical intervention is to make this genealogy visible, to trace the violence of 1990 back through the institutional and political structures that produced it rather than treating it as a spontaneous eruption of ethnic hatred. The chain of accountability—from the body in the lake to the Cabinet that authorised its disposal—is simultaneously a chain of historical causality: it connects the immediate act of political murder to the institutional frameworks, colonial inheritances, and postcolonial political failures through which that murder became possible and then deniable. The photographs that must survive the seven moons are not only evidence of specific crimes; they are documents of a historical process whose full dimensions official historiography has refused to acknowledge.

A linear narrative of history requires closure, and closure requires completed mourning. Karunatilaka shows that in a context of state-sanctioned denial, mourning is fundamentally and politically "unfinished." The ghosts cannot "move on" because the social and political rituals that facilitate mourning -- public acknowledgment, truth-telling, and

institutional accountability have been systematically blocked. The ghosts' collective testimony, their sharing of names and stories in the spectral realm, becomes a surrogate, subaltern public sphere where the rituals denied by the living are performed. Somatic metaphors in the novel communicate the powerful articulation of remembering experiences that "pour from you like snot" or come "in the form of a cough, sneeze, ache, scratch, and itch." (Karunatilaka 152) These do not function merely as poetic expressions; they make a theoretical claim.

The historiography of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is a varied, unconventional, and politically urgent form of historical narration that challenges official accounts of Sri Lanka's civil conflict at every level: in its narrative form, its choice of narrator, its treatment of evidence, and its refusal of the consoling closures through which dominant historiography neutralises the claims of the dead. Hayden White's account of history as narrative construction illuminates the novel's challenge to the official version's claim to authority. Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history from the perspective of the defeated captures the novel's commitment to the wreckage that progress has left behind. Foucault's theorisation of power and discourse reveals the counter-archival function of the protagonist's photographs. Agamben's concept of bare life and the state of exception names the condition of the disappeared whose deaths the state has produced but refuses to acknowledge. Mbembe's necropolitics situates the novel's violence within a broader postcolonial political rationality. Guha's and Spivak's subaltern studies framework identifies the novel's narrative strategy as a form of subaltern historiography that creates the discursive conditions for voices that official history has determined must not speak.

Together, these frameworks reveal that *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is not simply a novel about history but a novel that performs a specific and politically committed mode of historical thinking—one that refuses the neutrality of official narration, insists on the claims of the dead upon the living, and treats the photographic archive not as supplementary evidence but as the primary form of historical truth available in a society that has destroyed all other forms. The dead narrator who cannot move on, the seven moons that count down toward transmission rather than resolution, the photographs that must reach the living before they are destroyed—all encode the novel's conviction that counter-history is not a scholarly exercise but a political and ethical emergency. In a society that has engineered amnesia as a form of governance, to remember—and to ensure that others remember—is the most radical act available to those who have witnessed what power requires to remain unseen: "Every death is significant, even when every life appears not to be." (Karunatilaka 375)

This sentence is the novel's historiographical manifesto. Against the biopolitical logic that assigns differential value to different lives—that determines some deaths are worth recording and others are not—the novel insists on the equal historical significance of every life that has been ended by political violence. Its counter-history is not a correction of the official record but a refusal of the framework through which the official record has been constructed: a refusal of the sovereignty that decides who may live and who must die, and of the historiography that consolidates that decision by making certain deaths invisible. The novel's most enduring achievement is to make them visible again, in the only form available to a literature that takes seriously the claims of the dead.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is a novel that refuses the consolations that war fiction often provides: the hero's redemption, the villain's punishment, the community's healing, the historical record's correction. Its narrator introduces himself, with characteristic bluntness, as "Maali Almeida: Photographer. Gambler. Slut" (Karunatilaka 1), and it is this same refusal of sentimentality and easy moral categorisation that structures the novel's entire engagement with trauma, memory, identity, historiography, and biopolitical violence. The dead narrator does not find peace. His photographs may or may not reach the people who need them. His perpetrators remain, for the most part, unaccountable. What the novel offers instead is something rarer and more demanding: a sustained, formally inventive, and politically committed act of witness that insists on the claims of the dead upon the living even when—especially when—the institutions of justice have failed to honour those claims. The study undertaken in the preceding chapters has sought to illuminate the dimensions of this achievement through the analytical frameworks of trauma theory, memory studies, postcolonial identity theory, historiography, and biopolitical thought, each of which has brought into focus a different dimension of the novel's engagement with the human and political costs of Sri Lanka's civil conflict.

Chapter Two established that trauma, memory, and identity in the novel are not discrete thematic concerns but mutually constitutive processes whose entanglement is the novel's deepest subject. The dead narrator's inability to remember his own death—theorised through Cathy Caruth's account of traumatic belatedness and Dori Laub's concept of the crisis of witnessing—is not a plot device but a formal enactment of the fundamental

inaccessibility of traumatic experience: the event that cannot be integrated into consciousness at the moment of its occurrence and therefore returns as repetition rather than recollection. Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through illuminated the temporal structure of the protagonist's posthumous journey, caught between the compulsive repetition of unresolved fragments and the urgency of transmission that the seven moons impose. Judith Herman's dialectic of intrusion and constriction mapped the oscillations of the protagonist's posthumous consciousness with clinical precision, while Kai Erikson's concept of collective trauma situated the individual wound within the broader rupture of Sri Lanka's social fabric.

Memory, approached through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of reconstruction, Maurice Halbwachs's sociology of social framing, Pierre Nora's theorisation of *lieux de mémoire*, Roland Barthes's photographic semiotics, and Andreas Huyssen's and Jay Winter's accounts of the politics of forgetting and mourning, emerged as a contested practice whose stakes are inseparable from the political conditions of its production and suppression. The photographs that the protagonist has hidden across Colombo function as *lieux de mémoire* in Nora's precise sense—material condensations of historical experience that must bear the full weight of witness in a society that has destroyed the living conditions under which collective memory might be sustained. Barthes's distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum* illuminated the dual function of these images as both political evidence and insistence on the irreducible particularity of each life lost. Identity, read through Stuart Hall's processual account of cultural becoming, Homi K. Bhabha's theorisation of the Third Space, Judith Butler's and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's accounts of performativity and the closet, and Erik Erikson's psychosocial framework, appeared as a site of ongoing struggle between the

self's multiple and irreconcilable dimensions and the social world's demand for singular, legible belonging. Sedgwick's framework found particularly direct confirmation in the novel's own language, where the protagonist reflects that he has spent his life navigating "bunkers and narrow beds and lifelong closets" (Karunatilaka 140), a formulation that collapses the distinction between the literal danger of war and the social danger of exposure into a single shared structure of concealment.

Chapter Three extended this analysis into the domain of historiography and biopolitics, arguing that the novel constitutes a counter-history that challenges official accounts of Sri Lanka's civil conflict at every level of its formal and narrative construction. Hayden White's account of history as narrative construction illuminated the novel's challenge to the official version's claim to authority, demonstrating that the protagonist's counter-history is not less constructed than the official one but differently constructed, from the perspective of those whom the official version requires to remain invisible. Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history from the perspective of the defeated captured the novel's commitment to the wreckage that progress has left behind, and his conviction that even the dead are not safe if the enemy wins found its embodiment in the novel's refusal to let the conflict's violence be absorbed into a narrative of national reconciliation that has not, in fact, been earned.

Michel Foucault's theorisation of power, knowledge, and the regime of truth revealed the counter-archival function of the protagonist's photographs, situating them not merely as incriminating evidence but as a challenge to the discursive order on which the state's power depends. Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life and the state of exception named the condition of the novel's disappeared with philosophical precision—the *homines*

sacri whose deaths the state has produced but refuses to acknowledge as deaths in any legally or politically meaningful sense. Achille Mbembe's necropolitics situated the novel's violence within the broader postcolonial political rationality of the state's power to decide who must die. Ranajit Guha's and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern studies framework identified the novel's narrative strategy as a form of subaltern historiography that creates the discursive conditions for voices that official history has determined must not speak. The novel's own reckoning with the unacknowledged scale of state violence is stated nowhere more starkly than in its account of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, where the narrator notes that "eight thousand homes, five thousand shops, a hundred and fifty thousand homeless" resulted in "no official body count," and that "the Sri Lankan government has neither acknowledged nor apologised for it" (Karunatilaka 107). This is precisely the condition that Agamben's bare life and Mbembe's necropolitics name in philosophical terms: violence that the state commits but does not count, suffering that occurred but was never permitted to enter the official record as historical fact.

What the two analytical chapters together reveal is that the novel's engagement with trauma, memory, and identity on the one hand, and with historiography and biopolitics on the other, are not separate concerns but aspects of a single, sustained argument about the relationship between political violence and historical truth. Trauma is not only a psychological condition; it is a historiographical one, produced by the same biopolitical forces that determine whose deaths are recorded and whose are erased. Memory is not only a personal faculty; it is a political field in which the state's power to engineer amnesia confronts the counter-archival resistance of those who have witnessed what power requires to remain hidden. Identity is not only a psychological achievement; it is a political position,

shaped by the biopolitical distributions of life and death that determine whose subjectivity the social order recognises and whose it renders expendable. The novel holds all of these dimensions simultaneously in view, refusing the analytic separations that academic discourse imposes on what is, in lived experience, a single and indivisible condition of political violence and its consequences.

The formal achievements through which *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* sustains this argument are inseparable from its thematic commitments. The second-person narration enacts the crisis of witnessing that trauma produces, drawing the reader into an intimacy with the protagonist's consciousness that is simultaneously a estrangement from it, since the narrator can only address his own experience as though it belonged to someone else. The afterlife setting literalises the persistence of the politically unacknowledged dead, while the countdown structure of the seven moons encodes the urgency of counter-historical transmission in a world actively working to destroy the evidence. The photographs function simultaneously as personal memory, political counter-archive, and Barthesian certificates of presence for lives that biopolitical power has determined must have no official record. Each of these formal choices is also a political choice—an assertion about what literature can do that law, journalism, and official history cannot: bear witness to what power requires to remain unseen, and insist that those for whom no one has been held accountable retain a claim on the living that time and institutional silence cannot extinguish.

The novel's insistence on multiplicity rather than singularity—of identity, of historical perspective, of moral judgement—extends to its treatment of its own protagonist. The narrator's reflection that "you are not the you that you think you are" but rather "everything you have thought and done and been and seen" (Karunatilaka 356) offers a

precise summation of the identity theory developed across Chapter Two: selfhood in the novel is cumulative and relational rather than essential, produced by history and circumstance rather than residing beneath them as a fixed core awaiting discovery. This refusal of essentialism extends to the novel's treatment of national identity and historical truth alike, where Hayden White's and Walter Benjamin's frameworks reveal that the search for a single, authoritative account of Sri Lanka's civil war is itself a misunderstanding of what historical truth, under conditions of mass violence and state denial, can be.

Within the broader context of postcolonial war literature, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* occupies a position of considerable significance. It belongs to a tradition of literary works that have used formal innovation and political commitment to contest official histories of colonial and postcolonial violence. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* gives voice to the ghost of slavery's victims and insists on the continuing claims of the dead upon the living in ways that illuminate Karunatilaka's own spectral historiography. Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, set in Sri Lanka during a closely related period of the same conflict, uses forensic anthropology as a framework for confronting the same landscape of disappearances and state violence, establishing a literary tradition of witness to the Sri Lankan conflict to which *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* makes a formally distinctive contribution through its deployment of comedy, the ghost story, and the second-person voice.

The significance of the novel extends beyond its literary achievement to its contribution to the broader political and ethical discourse surrounding Sri Lanka's civil conflict and its aftermath. Sri Lanka's war officially ended in 2009 with the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, but the questions of accountability, historical truth, and justice that the conflict produced have not been resolved by its military conclusion. The

thousands of disappeared, the evidence of war crimes committed by multiple parties, and the ongoing absence of a credible accountability mechanism ensure that the wounds the novel documents remain open. In this context, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* performs a function that exceeds the literary: it insists, in the terms of Benjamin's historiographical philosophy, that the historical struggle over what happened, who is responsible, and whose deaths matter is not concluded by the end of military hostilities but continues in the domain of memory, narrative, and cultural representation, where literature plays a role that no other form of discourse can adequately substitute.

Karunatilaka's novel ultimately proposes that literature's most fundamental responsibility, in the face of political violence and engineered amnesia, is to keep the counter-archive alive—to ensure that the photographs are passed on, that the testimony reaches its addressees, that the dead are not permitted to be forgotten by a history written in the interests of those who killed them. The broken camera that the protagonist carries through the afterlife is not merely a symbol of destroyed witness; it is a challenge to the reader, an insistence that the act of witnessing does not end with the witness's death but must be continued, by other means and in other hands, by those who receive what the dead have left behind. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* stands as one of the most significant works of contemporary world literature precisely because it refuses to treat the literary and the political as separate categories—because it insists, with formal brilliance and ethical urgency, that to write well about political violence is already to act against it.

The novel's own closing meditation on the nature of storytelling offers the most fitting final word on its purpose and its limits: "All stories are recycled and all stories are unfair. Many get luck, and many get misery. Many are born to homes with books, many

grow up in the swamps of war. In the end, all becomes dust. All stories conclude with a fade to black." (Karunatilaka 146)

Against the biopolitical logic that assigns differential value to different lives, against the necropolitical machinery that produces certain deaths as administratively invisible, and against the historiographical frameworks that determine whose experiences constitute history and whose do not, the novel insists elsewhere that "every death is significant, even when every life appears not to be" (Karunatilaka 375). The study undertaken here has sought to demonstrate the extraordinary formal and political intelligence with which Karunatilaka has made that significance felt—and to honour, in the terms available to literary scholarship, the claims that the novel makes on behalf of the dead who cannot yet rest.

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