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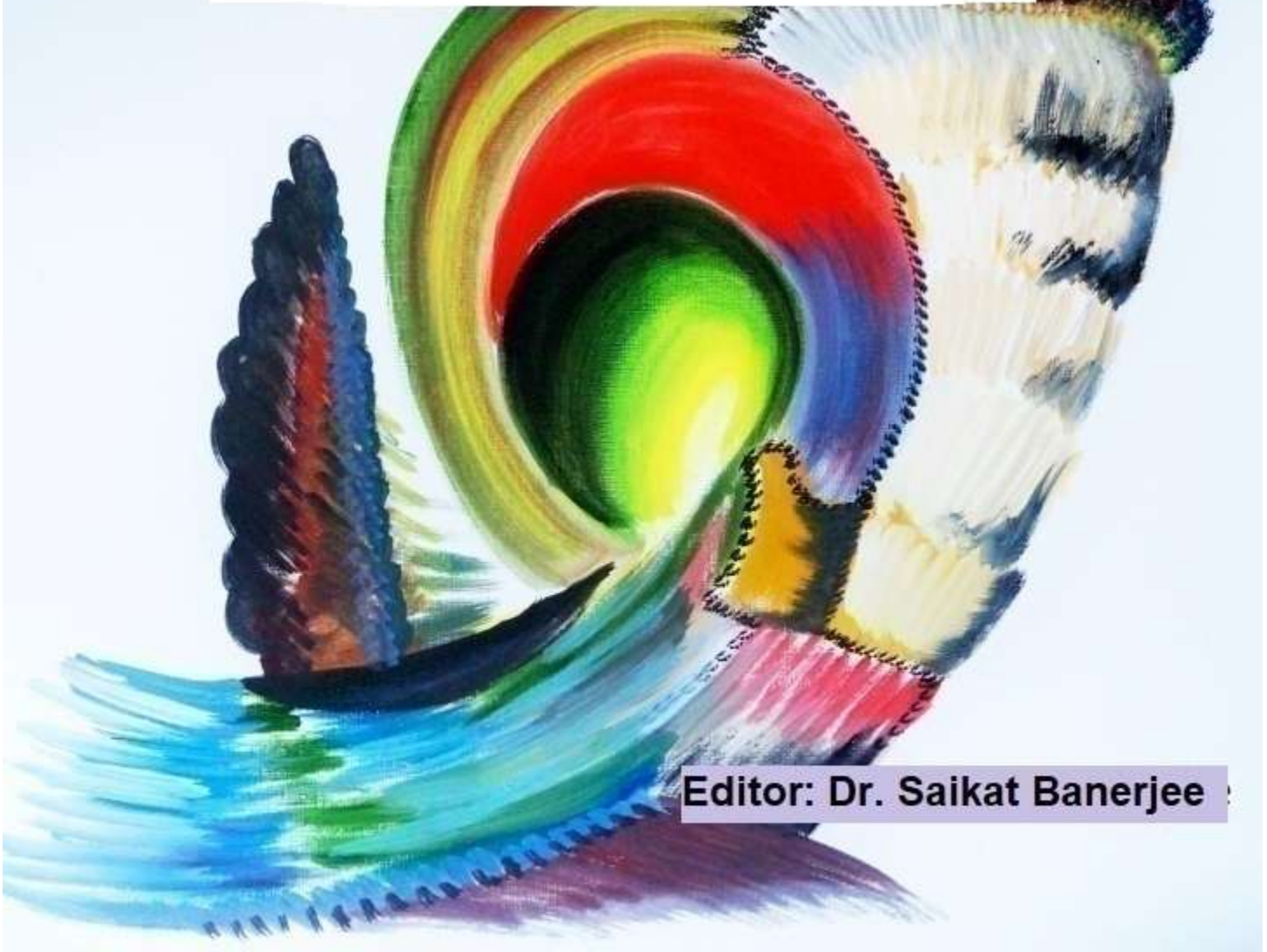

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Resisting Erasure: Material Memory in *Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

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Abstract: Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is a skilfully crafted text depicting the ethnic violence in the context of the Sri Lankan Civil War. This paper examines how objects: photographs, documents, and bodily remnants, serve as mnemonic devices that invoke, contain, and transmit memory. These objects not only capture individual experiences but also reflect the broader socio-political trauma of war. Maali Almeida, a war photographer navigating the afterlife, leaves behind a collection of hidden photographs that serve as evidence of state violence and suppressed histories. These images act as material witnesses, resisting erasure and offering an alternative to dominant narratives. Similarly, objects such as his camera and undeveloped film rolls embody fragmented memories, underscoring how material remnants persist beyond human existence.

Keywords: Memory, Materiality, Photographs, History, Trauma, War, Violence, Sri Lanka.

Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022), winner of the Booker Prize, is a genre-defying novel that blends satire, mystery, and the supernatural to examine Sri Lanka's turbulent history. Set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009), the novel follows Maali Almeida, a war photographer who wakes up in the afterlife and is given seven moons (days) to uncover the truth behind his murder and ensure his hidden photographs expose the war's atrocities. Lambros Malafouris' *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (2013) offers a groundbreaking perspective on cognition through the framework of Material Engagement Theory (MET). Malafouris challenges traditional cognitive science paradigms by positing that cognitive processes are not confined within the brain but are distributed across human interactions with material objects. Similarly, Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* offers a critical framework for understanding material memory in contemporary cultural and literary contexts. In his essay "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", Nora argues that in modern societies, where living, communal memory (milieux de mémoire) has disintegrated under the pressures of modernization, memory survives not as tradition but as trace,preserved in objects, images, archives, and monuments. These

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material forms, or sites of memory, emerge precisely because the environments that once sustained memory have disappeared.

In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Shehan Karunatilaka engages material memory as a critical force in both invoking and challenging the dominant narratives of Sri Lanka's ethnopolitical violence. The novel positions objects: photographs, cameras, clothing, newspapers, natural landscapes; not merely as passive remnants but as active agents of memory. These material traces, particularly those associated with the protagonist Maali Almeida, a murdered war photographer, bear witness to a buried history: the massacres, complicities, and silences of the Sri Lankan Civil War and the ethnic riots that preceded it.

Maali's identity itself is materially anchored in his camera, blurring the line between the corporeal and the mechanical. As he states posthumously,

> "If you had a business card, this is what it would say. MAALI ALMEIDA. Photographer. Gambler. Slut. If you had a gravestone, it would say: MALINDA ALBERT KABALANA 1955–1990" (Karunatilaka 10).

The photograph and the camera are not only mnemonic tools but defining aspects of Maali's being. It is so integral that the line between identity and material is dissolved. His camera does not simply document his world; it inscribes him within the collective trauma and memory of a nation. This interweaving of self and object calls to mind Bernard Stiegler's notion of technics as exteriorized memory systems, wherein tools and objects extend human memory and experience beyond the limits of the brain. (Steigler 70) Maali's Nikon 3ST is such a prosthesis, a vessel of what Pierre Nora terms lieux de mémoire: sites where memory crystallizes and secretes itself. The camera becomes a mobile site of memory, a symbol of counter-memory against state-sponsored forgetfulness. The most prominent lieux de mémoire in the novel are Maali's photographs: graphic, damning images of political executions, ethnic cleansing, and state brutality.

Objects found in Jaki's home: Maali's jackets, X-rays, address book, and religious pendants; serve as keepsakes of memory and identity (Karunatilaka 95). These objects refuse to let Maali vanish completely; they narrate the story of a complex, divided individual, bound by spiritual symbolism, political defiance, and personal myth. Their survival after death illustrates how material culture sustains memory beyond corporeal life. Similarly, Hotel Leo emerges as a locus of layered memory: personal, political, and historical. It is a site

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where Maali's life unfolds: "He met his clients at the Hotel Leo" (Karunatilaka 54), a place of professional deals and intimate encounters. The hotel also testifies to the transformation of the city itself, morphing from a migrant inn to a cinema, holding echoes of post-colonial urban metamorphosis (Karunatilaka 63). Hotel Leo becomes a palimpsest of Sri Lanka's socio-political changes, accumulating narratives of survival, decadence, and decay.

Smells also act as triggers for involuntary recollection. The scent of darkroom chemicals invokes Maali's years as a photographer, a memory further entwined with hidden negatives: "Reels of negatives from the past six years in carefully classified Tupperware boxes" (Karunatilaka 96). These negatives, photographic and metaphorical, contain silenced truths, preserved not in official archives but in plastic containers tucked away from surveillance. Similarly, the perfume of Elsa: lavender and talcum, immediately returns Maali to their first meeting, symbolizing how olfactory memory can violently pierce the present (Karunatilaka 98). These moments reflect how Seven Moons employs involuntary memory, reminiscent of Proust's madeleine, to explore how the past resurfaces in the body unbidden.

Central to this exploration is the photograph. Maali's camera becomes both a shield and a weapon. He documents war crimes, torture, and ethnic violence, often at great personal cost. His photographs, marked with "©MA," appear in newsletters, NGO pamphlets, and even protest walls, each image a frozen act of resistance and remembrance (Karunatilaka 74). Yet these same images provoke ethical discomfort. In one particularly harrowing memory, Maali photographs a woman burning alive:

> "You took a photo of her that Newsweek paid for and never published… 'I remember every face,' she says… 'You were there, taking my picture, like it was some fucking wedding'" (Karunatilaka 60).

This scene directly engages with Sontag's critique of war photography: the tendency of images to aestheticize suffering, alienate the viewer, and obscure complicity. Photography, as Roland Barthes suggests in Camera Lucida, is haunted by death, it is "a kind of primitive theater, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead" (Barthes 32). In Seven Moons, Maali's photos become literal ghost-traps, storing memory like trapped light, only to be rediscovered after his murder. The act of "developing negatives" takes on a double meaning, it is both a technical process and a moral imperative to make visible the truths that power seeks to erase (Karunatilaka 209).

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The photographs that Maali captures throughout *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* function as volatile sites of material memory that not only document the violence of Sri Lanka's history but also actively challenge the state's monopolized narratives. These images resist state-sanctioned erasure and instead assert a counter-memory that implicates both official and unofficial agents of violence. Early in the novel, Maali states his intention with characteristic bluntness: "'We use them to try and stop the war'" (Karunatilaka 75). This declarative ambition suggests that photography, far from being neutral or apolitical, becomes a weapon wielded against dominant ideologies.

Photographs in the novel also carry political danger, particularly the envelope titled "Queen," which Maali claims contains his most "dangerous photographs" (Karunatilaka 96). These are images that expose the state's complicity in the 1983 pogroms and depict, unflinchingly, the massacres of Tamil civilians. The content of this envelope, when eventually unveiled, includes stark portrayals of atrocity: "the lady in the pink salwar being doused with petrol," "the naked boy surrounded by dancing devils," and "the fellow with the cleaver hacking at an old man's side" (Karunatilaka 116). These photographs are not mere documentation but indictments, each frame an accusation against both the perpetrators and the silence of history.

What makes Maali's work particularly subversive is its challenge to both Sinhala nationalist and Tamil militant narratives. He is accused of serving "many masters" (Karunatilaka 96), including the army, international press, and CNTR (Centre for National Truth and Reconciliation), a fictional human rights organization. The multiplicity of his allegiances raises ethical questions about objectivity and complicity. When Elsa asks, "Whose side are you on, kolla?" Maali replies, "The side that pays me" (Karunatilaka 102). This cynical quip reveals the entangled politics of survival and truth-telling under a repressive regime where the boundaries between witness, collaborator, and mercenary blur.

Yet Maali's camera ultimately serves the dispossessed. CNTR's interest in his work, especially the unpublished images from the 1983 riots, reflects a larger archival impulse: to reclaim suppressed narratives through material evidence. Elsa's reminder that "the Sri Lankan government has neither acknowledged nor apologised" for the pogroms underscores the failure of official history (Karunatilaka 100). Through Maali's photographs, the novel constructs what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls historical noise- events that are silenced

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in the making of history but preserved in its margins (Trouillot 26). The photographs become part of this counter-history, offering what the state has tried to erase.

One of the most significant ways *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* mobilizes material memory is through the act of over-documentation, Maali's compulsive habit of photographing beyond the official project brief. These "extra pictures" serve not as filler, but as political evidence, testimony, and in many cases, suppressed memory: "You had taken more shots on these bullshit fixing missions than you did on photo assignments" (Karunatilaka 167). This abundance of illicit imagery: enabled by his silent Nikon 3ST, subverts the government's surveillance and narrative control by amassing a private counter-archive of the war's forgotten or deliberately concealed atrocities.

The Nikon camera itself becomes a vessel of memory, transporting Maali and the reader through spaces of violence and resistance. In the LTTE camps, it is Maali's camera that captures the paradoxical image of war: not just fighters and rifles, but "Uncles, grandmas, farmers, cowherds and schoolteachers" taking up arms (Karunatilaka 172). These images complicate any reductive, state-sanctioned notion of terrorist camps, offering instead a fractured, humanized, and deeply political counter-memory. As Maali notes: "Major Raja's staff saw the story as an example of civilian oppression under the LTTE. But the Tigers were spinning it as a tale of people power" (Karunatilaka 172). These divergent interpretations reflect the larger contestation over memory and narrative during the war, where Maali's photographs mediate multiple, often conflicting truths.

The political potency of photography reaches its apex when Maali captures an image that reveals collusion among supposed enemies: a Tiger commander, a government major, and a Western journalist seated around a single table (Karunatilaka 173). This photograph, as the novel makes clear, is the kind of material proof that can ignite another '83, a year synonymous with genocidal violence: "If these are seen, this country will burn again" (Karunatilaka 190). Material memory here threatens not just to reveal the past, but to disrupt the present. Cyril Wijeratne, whose image appears in a compromising frame during the riots, underscores the danger: "pictures like that get you killed" (Karunatilaka 176). The stakes of remembering are death itself.

Significantly, these photographs do not remain inert or symbolic. They are literally weaponized. Maali's negatives, hidden from all his employers due to his sleight-of-hand with 36-frame reels, are smuggled into the future, wrapped in plastic and taped to bad vinyl albums for camouflage (Karunatilaka 236, 241). They exist

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not just as static records but as ticking time-bombs of justice, potentially igniting memory where silence has prevailed. When these negatives rain "like confetti" into Jaki's lap, they are not mere remnants of a past life but instruments of truth, as Maali begs her: "Please make a thousand copies and paste them all over Colombo" (Karunatilaka 238).

This deflation of Maali's political ambitions coincides with the mystery surrounding his own death. Early in the novel, he suspects he was killed for the content of his photographs, comparing himself to other assassinated journalists and activists: "Maybe you were taken for doing your job too well, like all those journos and activists… The LTTE took out Dr Ranee Sridharan, the government took out Richard de Zoysa…" (Karunatilaka 43). However, as memory returns to him, the truth is far more personal and devastating. His murder stems not from his photography, but from his queer identity. The revelation that Maali was garrotted by Stanley Dharmendran, the father of his lover Dilan, aided by '83 thugs Balal and Kottu, reframes his death through the lens of homophobic violence: "Balal pulled on the things around your neck… the twine of the cyanide capsules drew blood… you thought that if they wanted to throttle you they should be pulling from the other end" (Karunatilaka 313).

Maali's homosexuality, hidden behind layers of secrecy and shame, is another axis of erasure and memory suppression. When he recalls his father's violent homophobia: "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 29), it reveals the internalized trauma of existing as a queer man in a violently heteronormative society.

Thus, Maali's photographs and his body alike become sites of contested memory. His death, initially interpreted as a political assassination, becomes a more intimate form of erasure, one where queer identity is incompatible with nationalist respectability. Yet even in death, Maali attempts to reclaim narrative agency. His obsession with recovering the hidden negatives: "Memories may bring pain… but there is one memory you wish for. And it should be how you died or who killed you, but it is neither. You wish to remember where you hid the negatives" (Karunatilaka 112) is less about solving a mystery than preserving memory from oblivion.

In the end, while Maali fails to alter dominant narratives through his photographs, he succeeds in revealing the fragility of historical truth in the face of institutional control, homophobia, and political violence.

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His story illustrates how memory, particularly material memory, is vulnerable not only to forgetting, but also to distortion and co-optation. The struggle to remember, therefore, becomes an act of resistance against both historical erasure and personal annihilation.

Pierrce Nora claims: "No society has ever produced archives as deliberately as our own" (Nora 13), but this archival obsession does not guarantee understanding. The novel reflects this. Even if the photos are released, will they change anything? Or will they simply be dismissed as fake, misused, or forgotten in a media-saturated world? This anxiety haunts the end of the novel. Memory, in Maali's case, is not necessarily salvation, it is also burden. His task is to choose how to die meaningfully. To leave memory behind is a political act, but its outcome is uncertain. Nora's ambivalence is mirrored in Karunatilaka's refusal to offer closure. The archive may speak, but will anyone listen?

After a detailed analysis, we come to the conclusion that Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* offers a haunting and incisive exploration of how material memory, particularly in the form of photographs which can challenge dominant historical narratives and expose the violent machinery of statecraft, nationalism, and ethnic division. Through Maali's lens, the novel dismantles the simplistic binaries of Sri Lankan history, revealing a far murkier and morally compromised reality: Sinhalese regimes killing Sinhalese dissidents, the LTTE murdering Tamil civilians in the name of liberation, JVP revolutionaries brutalizing the very working class they claimed to protect, and institutions like the CNTR quietly complicit in selective truth-telling. Even a lone Tamil minister, like Stanley Dharmendran, collaborates with a Sinhalese-majority government whose power rests on Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy, while the Buddhist clergy itself is not immune to nationalist violence, as evidenced by the monk who assassinated SWRD Bandaranaike.

This complex and fractured political reality is further illuminated by the ethnic riot of 1983, which emerges in the novel not as an organic eruption of communal hatred, but as a politically orchestrated performance where only the innocent suffered. Maali's photographs, as instruments of material memory, unearth this uncomfortable truth. The most incendiary image he captures: a secret meeting between Sri Lankan military officers, LTTE leaders, and foreign actors, exposes the farce of ethnic polarization, revealing that those in power often collaborated across supposed enemy lines for strategic and economic gain.

Maali's vision, to use these images to disrupt state-sponsored myths and catalyze justice, ultimately meets a tragic end. The very photographs that could have exposed atrocities from all sides are suppressed or destroyed. CNTR, supposedly a truth-seeking institution, refuses to publish images implicating the LTTE, citing ethnic loyalties. Meanwhile, Minister Cyril Wijeratne warns that revealing the photographs from the "Queen of Spades" envelope: images that show Tamil civilians being lynched and key political figures, including himself, complicit in the violence, would ignite the country once more, recreating the horrors of July '83. These photographs are deemed "more dangerous than a bullet," not because they lie, but because they reveal a truth too damning for any political faction to accept.

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