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“Maybe it is easier to forget. But forgetting cures nothing.” – Remembering, Forgetting, and the role of Memory in Shehan Karunatilaka’s *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022)

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Abstract: Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka’s 2022 novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, balances fiction and nonfiction through magic realism. His novel sees its eponymous protagonist turning up in the afterlife, and being informed of the seven-moon period before his soul is lost forever. Thus, he must use this time to tie up the loose ends of his life, find his killer(s), and in the course of such actions, help change the tide of the war that has gripped his country. The narration foregoes the conventional format of storytelling, shifting perspective from the second to the third person narration and toggling between the present and the past. Apart from being deeply entrenched in Lankan culture, politics, and history, the narrative witnesses a constant pull towards the act of remembering. The novel is also concerned with how the phenomenon of recalling is an act of reclamation, a way of making voices heard, contributing to our shared as well as individual history. This makes forgetting a sort of surrendering which legitimizes the actions of institutions, while turning the act of retention into something rebellious, one that refuses to let bygones be bygones. When we remember, we speak out; when we speak out, we rebel. Using Hirsch’s idea of postmemory and Hartman’s concept of critical fabulation, this paper will examine how Karunatilaka positions memory and remembering as instruments of resistance, invoking the suppressed histories of violence that nations often choose to forget.

Keywords: Death, Magic Realism, Memory, Resistance, Civil War

Introduction

Shehan Karunatilaka’s *Chats with the Dead*, later published as *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) begins with the protagonist, Malinda Almeida Kabalana, stranded in the afterlife – an “endless waiting room” (2) filled with souls of the recently and the not so recently deceased. What makes up the plot is how Almeida spends his seven sunsets trying to remember and find his murderers, eavesdropping over his acquaintances’ conversations and in the process, find a series of photographs he took that might draw attention to the politics and brutality of the

civil war ravaging the country of Lanka. The civil war refers to the nearly two-decade-long conflict between the protesting Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese on the issue of a separate Elam state, which they said would free the Tamils from the hands of the latter. Things reached a boiling point in 1983 when Tamil homes and shops were destroyed, and several lay dead, reportedly at the hands of a violent Sinhalese mob. This conflict ended in 2009 when the government quelled the rebellion by eliminating the LTTE Chief, Velupillai Prabhakaran, ushering in an era of apparent peace in the island nation. The Sri Lankan civil war remains one of the most harrowing episodes of postcolonial violence in modern South Asian history.

Throughout the novel, Maali's relationship with memory is special. The text employs memory as a narrative trope to recount and weave past events into the narrative and as a thematic device to enhance the plot. An example of this would be the concept of remembering the deceased through personal belongings, memorials, totems, tales from their lives, and the like; failure to do so would result in the soul getting stranded forever in the "In-Between" (13) or the mortal plane. Death, in the novel, is treated as a transfer or journey from one state of consciousness to another. Individuals seem to be divided into versions of themselves: one that remembers how they died Down There, what they were doing, alongside the memories of the war; and the other that is aware of their arrival into the life beyond, which entails new rules and laws. For instance, Dr. Ranee Sridharan, the lady in charge of handling the dead souls, seems to have moved on happily from the world of the living. When pestered continuously, she announces how nobody wants to end up dead, adding a "What to do? Complaining won't help" (5) to cement the fact that what is done is done. When Maali locates her, he tells her about meeting the man who had organized the hit on her, adding how sorry he was for her death. The only response Maali gets is "a weary smile" as she "shrugs" (7). It is not just her he remembers, but also how she used his photos in her book without his permission, to which she says – "I am not my previous birth. Neither are you." (88). Maali's ability to remember every detail about her life and death highlights two very aspects of human nature: first, how individuals seem to locate others on the basis of a shared knowledge, be it of people, places, or incidents; second, no matter how hard one tries, memories come to us naturally, making up our entire being; to sever ourselves from our memories means altering our existence. Maali's refusal to forget signals his embracing of the earthly tether of memories binding him to a life that is no longer his.

Pierre Nora's *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1989), talks about "lieux de mémoire, sites of memory" (7), and "milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory" (7). According to him, sites of

memory exist because the real environments do not. History, he says, has constantly been on the “conquest and eradication of memory” (8) which in turn changes the equation between memory and history. He defines memory as a “life, borne by living societies founded in its name”, which is always “in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.” (8), while history is “a representation of the past” (8), which is open to critique and examination. Memory and history are on contending sides because the latter is “perpetually suspicious of memory”, whose actual intent “is to suppress and destroy it” (9). Thus, an establishment of a national identity, requires history to imperatively create a “critically a “true” memory” (9), furthering it into a project of nation building. This process of turning history into an unbroken search of collective identity, that is, the nation, transforms the historian into a national ragdoll who loses their objectivity. Therefore, the study of locations of memory by the historiographer must not herald “the end of a tradition of memory” (11). We often mistake history and memory, Nora writes, because “What we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history” (13). Modern memory is concerned primarily with archiving, he observes, while true memory survives in habits and traditions, transformed through the passage of time. Thus, the essence of history should always include true and correct memories. Nevertheless, the onus of remembering falls upon the individual, because “when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means” (16). The memory of violence that the Tamils endured constitute the location of memory because the real environment no longer exists, and as is the case with all nations, every country tries to sell an official history. Since our memory is decidedly “retinal” and “televisual” (17), visualizing violence and individual memory will help us resolve gaps in larger, imposing narratives.

Looking up to the Dead

To speak and to call out is to remember. We live in memories and thoughts of other people in our absence. Absence does not necessarily mean death; conversely, death is just another form of absence – an individual goes missing from the lives of people. We remember people through memories and dreams. The dead in Maali’s world travel through the air, like prayers meant to be heard. They traverse miles in seconds, watch over anyone they choose, and haunt places of their choice for as long as they desire. However, their presence seems to be mandated whenever and wherever someone speaks or thinks of them. Even the dead, when unable to speak to get justice, turn into something alien. The living can make their presence felt, but the dead cannot. The inability to speak, especially

about the violence done to one, comes as a product and exacerbates the effect of that violence. Similarly, Karunatilaka uses the local lore of the yakas to materialize the effects of violence into figures that roam the mortal plane, indulge and interfere in human activities, but cannot move on to The Light. Dr. Ranee's description of yakas is "that yakas are made, not born, and each has a story that they no longer tell", like the "The Cannibal Uncle" who "was a Pettah bomb blast victim", "The Feral Child" who "was made to kill his uncles for the Tigers", "The Sea Demon had been ragged to death at university", while "The Atheist Ghoul was a provincial councillor carved up by the JVP" and that the "Black Sari Lady" was someone who "lost five children to the war" (275). She compares the yakas to gamblers who have run into debts they cannot repay, accordingly presenting the aspect of the helplessness of the spirits who have been lost with nobody to help them get justice. Thus, the consequence of violence is not only made to disappear but also silenced.

Saidiya Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts* (2008) examines the silenced presence of coloured women who were victims of the Atlantic slave trade, and whose voices were made available to the public only through white mediators, in their journals, documents, and pornographic stories. She observes how archival data are riddled with gaps, especially when it comes to black women. She introduces the concept of "critical fabulation" in this very essay, which tries to fill the gaps in data by taking in basic elements from the "authorized" narrative (11), completing them with speculative and dialectic reading to disrupt the established order of hierarchy by laying bare the discrepancies. This paves the way for a more decolonized discourse. Karunatilaka, in his novel, fills in the gaps by taking unverified claims and untold memories of violence and tries to establish a narrative that incorporates the memories of the silenced. In a way, he attempts to decolonize the history of Lanka by taking power back from the Sinhalese imperialists, reclaiming it for the Tamils. However, this is not to hypothesize that the violence faced by women in the Atlantic slave trade is at par with the violence faced by Tamils in Sri Lanka. The neutralization of the LTTE threat seemingly ushered in a new nation-building era marked by methodical calmness. Photojournalist Shyam Tekwani writing for New Lines Magazine observes: "Years later, when the guns finally fell silent at Nandikadal Lagoon in May 2009 and the state proclaimed victory, nearly 100,000 had been killed. Many more disappeared into euphemisms: "operations," "counterinsurgency," "rehabilitation," "relocation," "missing in action." Villages vanished, cities were shelled and generations grew knowing only suspicion. The world looked away, mistaking exhaustion for peace" (2). The now-concluded war survived only in memories, photographs, and as part of the sponsored historical narrative.

Forgetting and Remembering

To forget is to lose. In a space where forgetting is imperative for welcoming peace, remembering atrocities committed becomes an act of rebellion. For the wronged, remembering is the only way to make sense of their pain; for the perpetrators and enablers, remembering holds up a mirror to their actions.

History tends to forget people who are killed in action, especially those involved in war. However, do individuals who die truly forget what happened to them? Spirits like Sena or the pink saree and pottu-clad lady remember every detail pertaining to their murder(s). While Sena capitalizes and weaponizes it to fan flames of discontent and unrest, the lady in pink simply remembers not to forget. The fate of the victims of Lankan violence is revealed through Almeida's encounter with the ghost of the pink saree lady: "She tells you that she wandered for a thousand moons before she found peace. That many of the victims of the 1983 riots are still roaming the In Between." (Karunatilaka 61), adding that while some "walked into The Light" making peace with their deaths, forgiving their killers, some spirits "became demons" because passing over to the other side makes one forget about the past and that "We should never forget" (61). Forgetting absolves one of responsibility – it opens up possibilities of reconstructing incidents that may or may not have any resemblance with the truth, robbing the victim of their chance at securing justice. Realizing this, Sena tries to rile up the fellow killed in order to orchestrate a large-scale attack on their killers. The only difference between them is that some ghosts (like the saree-clad lady) wait for their killers to be punished, whereas the dead JVP-er likes taking charge and manipulating the realm of the living.

Sena's motivations seem to mirror the voices of those killed in mindless violence. He publicizes how the Helpers intend to make everybody waste their seven moons on the mortal plane and make peace with whatever happened. According to him, they do so because it is the most hassle-free way to deal with souls who have accepted their fate since "Every soul is allowed seven moons to wander the In Between. To recall past lives. And then, to forget. They want you to forget. Because, when you forget, nothing changes." (93). Sena's anger is directed not only towards his murderers in Down Below, but also towards the emissaries of The Light; if the world of the living has killed them, and the world of God wants us to forget whatever has happened, where does one go to seek justice? To seek answers? does not that make the world of spirits the perfect place to exact revenge? Because "The world will not correct itself. Revenge is your right. Do not listen to Bad Samaritans. Demand your justice. The system failed you. Karma failed you. God failed you. On earth as it is up here." (93)

Marianne Hirsch in *Generation of Postmemory* talks about postmemory not as an event, but that as a relationship and condition which the “second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (103). She also incorporates the role of photographs as archival records providing a presence of voice to the absence of violence. Hirsch observes that literature and photography, once dismissed as factually wrong basis of consideration for historiographers, have since come to the forefront when it comes to archive formation because they offer more than what traditional historical archives do. Postmemory is an “uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture”, wherein the past defines the present rather than defining the future. It refers to the memory that is inherited by the succeeding generation via “stories, images, and behaviors” (106). Photography comes into the foray when one remembers how powerful a medium it is in conveying messages and providing access to events that not everyone has witnessed. Since memory can never be translated word by word between individuals, postmemory becomes an appropriation of incidents, establishing a connection between the past and the present. In the novel, Maali’s photographs usher in an age of postmemory, wherein sins of the past are laid bare before the generations to come, and before people who can “reindividualize “cultural/archival” memory” (115) because pictures can “outlive their subjects and owners” (115). In reality, journalistic endeavours, human rights watchdogs, and NGOs working for the reintegration and return of civil war victims in Lanka come bearing the tools to measure postmemory and diagnose its signs. With each attempt at healing, unearthing mass graves, or identifying missing persons, archival and collective memory expands, thus shaping the coming generations from effects of a war that had no formal contact with them.

Remembering the Future

Almeida’s memory is never reassuring – it is in every way as disruptive as all memories are. Our memories disrupt; sometimes they comfort by interrupting the bad, sometimes they disturb by interrupting the comfortable. Almeida’s memory of Major Raja Udugampola, the desk soldier turned butcher who “ordered the earth movers to dig graves large enough to bury villages in, then he made soldiers dress the bodies in Tiger uniforms and pose them. Then, he made you and the Lake House hacks take the photos. Then, he confiscated your film” (Karunatilaka 249), jolts him even in his spirit state. Almeida felt assaulted by memory of the Major, like the person himself (252) because he violated not only the modesty of journalism as a profession, but also that of individuals. For Major Udugampola, every person was a means to an end; he’d rather manufacture memories to support violence than

court peace. Maali's memories of the Major and his torture palace "arrives in the form of cough. A whooping cough that hurts your brain and makes you roll forward. It sings the edges of nerves you no longer have and takes you back to a place that was both room and corridor" (250), because it reminds him of how being useful to the establishment spares one from institutional torture. The individuals being beaten and tortured within inches of their lives outgrew their usefulness to the Major and his superiors. Thus, the torture palace becomes a spot of ill, disruptive memory that entails recollections of places forgotten from the larger public consciousness, such as the mass graves that house unaccounted bodies, away from people's eyes.

Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009) talks about how different histories of violence confront each other and what follows it. Taking cue from the interaction between a literary critic and a black racist (Walter Benn Michaels versus Muhammad Khaleed) in the U.S. Holocaust Museum, Rothberg theorizes how collective memory contests for space in the public sphere, where interaction with different collective memory/memories produces a "zero-sum struggle for preeminence" (3). Simply speaking, memory works multi-directionally, actively through "negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing" (3) to augment the presence of memory that has so far been subordinated or repressed. Collective memories of apparently different histories are not fundamentally different from each other but rather interact dialogically. Multidirectional memory seeks to prove that memory and identity do not combine faultlessly; rather, they come into being through the dialogical process of remembrance that happens on a shared, uneven territory. The Lankan identity in the novel is an example of such a multidirectional memory occurring right before the readers. People like Stanley Dharmendran, or like the Dead Priest, interact with different versions of Malinda, laying bare their shared sense of violence; the colonial, European-inflicted torture alongside the postcolonial, pro-Sinhalese government that brutally crushed dissent – both of which remain unexplored and shape the contemporary Lankan identity. The dialogic interplay between these two kinds of violence which co-exist in the collective consciousness, shapes the entire narrative and later, the history of Sri Lanka where no proper addressal exists to answer the aftermath of the war.

Photographs play an important role in the novel. They are a window to the truth and a silent witness to the atrocities that go unnoticed by the larger audience, complementing memories in remarkable ways. It was Malinda's photographs that outlived him. The truth, combined with photographs, becomes a reckoning force in the novel. For every lie or "untruth" (304), Almeida provides photographic evidence that proves otherwise. Maali's photos ranged

from accidents to lynchings, bomb blasts, and crashes – “Viran delivered beautiful black-and-white prints of captured terrorists tied to logs, the wreckage of the helicopter of a moderate Tamil politician, the mangled hull of Air Lanka Flight 512 from Gatwick, taken before the bodies of the German, British, French and Japanese tourists were removed from the wreckage”, “He had called you three months ago to the Palace to photograph the JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera, alive and in custody...Three days later, you were called back to photograph his mutilated corpse”, “There were photos from snipped off negatives that King didn’t know you had. Father Jerome Balthazar, Anglican priest and human rights activist from Mannar, bound and gagged and dead in custody, though the authorities claimed he had taken a boat to India. D. B. Pillai, Radio Ceylon journalist, shot in custody and dumped on the beach, for the crime of reporting accurate casualties in his weekly broadcast”, “The burning car filled with young Tamil corpses, taken for Major Raja Udugampola’s private files, but kept for yours” (304). Thus, the photographs that Maali took birthed a strong sense of awakening in the hearts of the people who saw the sights for the first time.

(Some) Humans have Souls

By the end of the novel, Almeida (alongside the reader) realizes “that every death is significant, even when every life appears not to be”, thereby cementing the core theme of the novel. Maali’s photos get taken down, but they are out in the world with some people having seen them, visibilizing the violence that remained previously invisible. Historically speaking, the Civil War continued up till as late as 2009. The country disintegrated as it was destined to because “the people comfort themselves that the current lot were not as bad as the last lot, even though in many ways they are worse” (375).

As the novel comes to a close, Maali does not carry his broken Nikon camera because its purpose (and his) had been served, and their time on Earth was done in every way. The novel ends when Maali jumps into The Light, which will take him somewhere new and give him fresh memories. Once there, “you will have forgotten all of the above” (386). However, like the Dead Leopard remarked a couple of pages back, neither Malinda nor the reader will actually forget the series of events that had unfolded. The Light only makes one forget things, not erase them completely. The Dead Leopard remarked once that ““Nothing is forgotten. We just don’t remember where we put it.”” (382). Therefore, it might be safe to say, that memories (including those of violence) do not disappear but are simply rewritten. Every state tries their best to amend memories – sometimes theirs, sometimes of others; sometimes of failures, sometimes of successes. Communities affected by violence rarely have a direct connection

with its cause, but pay the price irrespectively. Their violence is visible because it happens to them, but to the communities outside or away from them, it is simply invisible, and so is its memory.

Our scars are what make us; they are not meant to be medicated over and forgotten. It becomes our responsibility as humans to unite as a community and ensure that our memories are not polished over by newer, kinder ones, because remembering and speaking them out loud together count as the first step towards rebellion and healing. To weaponize memories and grief is akin to cheating – both to the memory and the individual it belongs to. Therefore, it should always be our priority that we as individuals refuse to let our memories be dictated.

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