

Analyzing Shehan Karunathilaka's "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida": A Journey into  
Magical Realism

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## Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Analyzing Shehan Karunathilaka's "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida": A Journey into Magical Realism** is a bona fide record of sincere work done by, **Namitha Gylson, Register Number: 210021000942**, Bharata Mata College, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature under the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam during the year 2023-2024.

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## Declaration

I, hereby declare that the presented dissertation **Analyzing Shehan Karunathilaka's "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida": A Journey into Magical Realism** is based on the research that I did on under the supervision and guidance of **Ms.** Smitha Elizabeth, Guest Faculty, Research Centre and Postgraduate Department of English, Bharata Mata College, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. This is a report of my hands based on the research done on the selected topic and it is my original work and interpretations drawn therein are based on material collected by myself. It has not been previously formed basis for the award of any degree, diploma or fellowship or other similar title or recognition.

Date: **29/04/2024**

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This project follows MLA 8<sup>th</sup> edition

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Magical realism is a distinctive literary movement that blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy by presenting a realistic portrayal of the world intertwined with magical elements. Unlike conventional fantasy, magical realism integrates a significant amount of realistic detail and utilizes magical elements to convey a message about reality. Key aspects of magical realism include its definition as a style or genre of fiction and art that merges the ordinary with the extraordinary, frequently incorporating supernatural occurrences into an otherwise everyday or commonplace backdrop. As noted by M.H. Abrams, magical realism is characterized by its ability to seamlessly blend the mundane with the magical. Magic realism is a literary style that combines realistic portrayals of ordinary events with fantastical and dreamlike elements, as well as materials from myth and fairy tales. This unique blend was first described by German art critic Franz Roh in the 1920s, but it was Latin American authors who truly brought it to life in the realm of literature. By infusing their works with cultural and historical contexts, these authors were able to explore the complexities of post-colonial societies by merging the mystical with the mundane. Magic realism has since spread to other parts of the world, with authors like Salman Rushdie in India and Isabel Allende in Chile embracing the style and making it a global literary phenomenon. Magic realism possesses unique aspects and qualities that are closely associated with it. In his *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Matthew Strecher (1999) provides a definition of magic realism as the occurrence of "something too strange to believe" within a highly detailed and realistic setting (Strecher 267). While the fundamental characteristics of magic realism generally remain consistent, they can vary from one literary work to another. The common features employed in works exploring magic realism include fantastical realism, a setting grounded in the real world, authorial restraint, abundance, hybridity, metafiction, an intensified awareness of mystery, and political critique, among others.

One defining characteristic of magic realism is the incorporation of fantastical realism. Fantastical realism elements encompass fantasy traits such as levitation, telepathy, and telekinesis, which serve to immerse readers in a world of Phantasmagoria. Levitation involves suspending an object in a stable position without any physical contact or mechanical support. Telepathy involves the transmission of information from one person's mind to another's without the use of conventional human sensory channels or physical interaction. Telekinesis, on the other hand, refers to a theoretical psychic ability that enables an individual to manipulate a physical system without any physical contact. The real-world setting is a key characteristic of magic realism. Within this genre, writers incorporate magical elements into everyday situations, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. By revealing the magical aspects of the world we live in, authors create a sense of wonder and enchantment that feels incredibly lifelike. The third characteristic feature with regard to magic realism is authorial reticence. Authorial reticence means deliberate withholding of information about magical elements. That means no initial description is given about the fantastical element, thus it blends with reality and it seems too realistic for the author. Another feature is plentitude. Plentitude or abundance refers to the abundance of details given by the author to describe magical elements in a literary work. Because of deploying plentitude, the work looks more believable and fantastic. The characters and events which the author creates will seem complex and numerous. In short, plentitude refers to complex layering of elements that are extraordinary, strange, and excellent in nature.

Hybridity is yet another feature associated with magic realism. Hybridity refers to the use of multiple planes of reality, sometimes it may be contrasting in nature. Metafiction is yet another significant characteristic feature associated with magic realism. Metafiction refers to the description of a story within a story. Metafiction can also occur when the textual world enters into the reader's world. Heightened awareness of mystery is a characteristic feature of magic realism which works by leaving out some explanations or

descriptions, thereby creating confusion and mystery in the minds of readers. Yet another significant characteristic feature in connection with the concept of magic realism is political critique. Political critique refers to implicit criticism of society; particularly a prominent fraction or it can be about any wrongdoings happening in the society. Thus, magic realism is very interesting and intriguing for the readers.

Shehan Karunatilaka is a prominent writer in the world of magic realism. He is a Sri Lankan writer. He was born in 1975 in Galle, Sri Lanka. He grew up in Colombo, studied in New Zealand and has lived and worked in London, Amsterdam and Singapore. Shehan's notable works include *The Painter*, *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* (2010) and *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022). *The Painter* was shortlisted for the Gratian Prize in 2000. His debut novel, *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* was announced as the regional winner for Asia of the Commonwealth Book Prize.

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, a metaphysical thriller by Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka, has been awarded the 2022 Booker Prize for Fiction for the novel's "ambition of its scope, and the hilarious audacity of its narrative techniques". The announcement was made by Neil MacGregor, Chair of 2022 judges, in a ceremony at the Roundhouse, London, on October 17. According to Booker's website, the novel encapsulates the story of a war photographer who has woken up dead in what seems to be a celestial visa office. He has 'seven moon' to try and solve his death's mystery and help unveil a cache of photos that will rock war-torn Sri Lanka. Originally Published in January 2022, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is considered by many a searing satire set amid the mayhem of the Sri Lankan civil war.

The novel "*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*" by Shehan Karunatilaka follows the protagonist Maali Almeida through a journey that intertwines the realms of the living and the afterlife. Set in 1980s Colombo, Sri Lanka, the narrative unfolds through Maali's second-person perspective, offering a unique lens into his tumultuous life.



Growing up amidst his parents' turbulent marriage, Maali grapples with their constant conflicts, particularly after his father's departure. Unbeknownst to Maali, his father had been sending him letters, intercepted by his mother, which Maali discovers much later, leading to a rift between him and his mother. As a young man, Maali delves into photojournalism, capturing the harsh realities of Sri Lanka's political turmoil. Amidst his work and gambling habits, he forms relationships with Jaki and DD, the latter being a clandestine affair due to DD's fear of his father discovering his sexual orientation. Despite DD's urging to flee to the United States together, Maali is hesitant to leave his country and work behind.

Tragically, Maali's life takes a drastic turn when he is murdered by DD's father after refusing to sever ties with his son. Awakening in the afterlife's purgatorial realm, the In Between, Maali is tasked with resolving his unfinished business in the living world within seven days. Driven by a desire to expose injustices through his hidden photographs, Maali struggles with unresolved traumas and guilt, hindering his passage out of the In Between. Despite efforts to communicate with the living and aid those in danger, Maali eventually realizes that his life's value lies not in his work, but in the love and connections he shared with Jaki and DD. As his time in the In Between draws to a close, Maali gains clarity and transcends into The Light, recognizing the inherent worth of every life, whether in the realm of the living or beyond.

This project titled Analyzing Shehan Karunathilaka's "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida": A Journey into Magical Realism comprises five chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction, defining and explaining the term magic realism, providing background information about the author and his novel. In the second chapter, key characteristics of magical realism are discussed, and the use of magic realism in the novel is analyzed, exploring how it intersects with the realistic narrative. Third chapter delves into the cultural and historical context that influences the manifestation of magic realism in the narrative.

The fourth chapter elucidates major themes, symbols, and motifs associated with the novel, discussing the broader cultural and literary significance. It also examines how magic realism is employed to explore these themes and shape the narrative. Finally, the last chapter or conclusion aims to present the final output of this research work by highlighting the major points drawn from the preceding chapters.

## Chapter 2

### Identifying Magical Realism

Shehan Karunathilaka's novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is an extraordinary work of fiction, employing a diverse array of magical elements. Tracing the elements of fantastical realism (which includes levitation, telepathy and telekinesis), real world setting, authorial reticence, plenitude, hybridity, metafiction and political critique, this chapter identifies the magical elements employed in the novel. Fantastical elements in the novel consists of levitation, telepathy and telekinesis. Fantastical realism elements refer to fantasy traits like levitation, telepathy and telekinesis which helps to create Phantasmagoria in the readers.

‘Levitation’ refers to the process by which an object is held aloft in a stable position, without mechanical support via any physical contact. “The wind carries you in swirls over parapets and bus tops. The world has fuzzy edges, colors where there shouldn’t be any, and spirits wherever you look.” (Karunathilaka 19). The spirits in the novel have the power to travel in the winds. “It may also mean that you could safely attempt diving into a roof of a moving white van. In you go. It is like jumping into a swimming pool, if the water tasted...where our corpse has been” (Karunathilaka 34).

‘Telepathy’ refers to the process of information transmission from one person’s mind to another’s without using any known human sensory channels or physical interaction. Telekinesis refers to a hypothetical psychic ability allowing an individual to influence a physical system without physical interaction. “I can help you whisper.’ ‘You can?’ I only offer it to souls who have committed to the light. You’re making me bend rules.i hate bending rules” (Karunathilaka 298). Maali’s whispering to Jaki through her dreams with the guidance of Dr. Ranee is an example for telepathy.

The novel also provides ample evidences for telekinesis. “The van hits a bump near Bishop’s college. Sena inhales something that isn’t air and slaps both Balal and Kottu at the same time. The momentum of the van makes their heads bang together. Sena lets out a laugh and you do too. Even the dead enjoy a bit of slapstick” (Karunathilaka 34). In the latter half of the novel, Sena and his team takes revenge and kill their murderers by causing accidents.

Throughout this novel, the author portrays different kinds of ghosts and ghouls in it. “The cemetery teems with cripples and ghosts and horned figure and it is difficult to know where to look and where not to.” (Karunathilaka 48) “The Mahakali can’t enter here” (Karunathilaka 48). “I know it as the Mahakali ,the swallower of souls” (Karunathilaka 48) “ It is a deity whom demons and yakas kneel before”. (Karunathilaka 48). “The trees are lined with eyes and the pathway is blocked by ghouls”. ( Karunathilaka 49) “A ghost blows with the wind, a ghoulish directs the wind ”(Karunathilaka 53 ) “Every corrugated roof has a cat or a mongoose or a spirit slithering along its curves” (Karunathilaka 71) “She glares at you with .....work gathers dust” (Karunathilaka 71) “Her eyes are red and brown, her voice is black”( Karunathilaka 72). “There isn’t one satan that we have to destroy. There are hundreds of devils and thousands of yakas roaming every road and every street “(Karunathilaka 306)

The novel portrays examples of a variety of ghosts. “For every bloody ill in this country there is a yaka. She says the black prince causes miscarriages and delivers menstrual cramps. The Mohinini seduces lone drivers at night, the Riri yaka spreads cancers. The monk with the trident is technically a ghost but his rage has turned him into a ghoulish.” (Karunathilaka 306) “Mala pretas steal flavour from your food, Gevala pretas take solid from your shit, most of them are adept at reading ears and appetites” (Karunathilaka 306) “she says the naga yakas have beautiful faces and cobra heads and cannot forget about

1983. She says the kota yaka rides a cat, wears pearl and carries a battle axe. The bahirava yaka is born of the screams of sita and only rises when the gods fight or when the sun bleeds.” (Karunathilaka 306)

Another characteristic feature associated with magic realism is real-world setting. Writers create a magical world of fantasy in real life situation thus blurring the difference between fantasy and reality. In other words, magic realism does reveal the magical elements in the existing world, it can be some marvellous creations by the authors which seems so realistic in nature.

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* weaves facts and imagination to unravel the unresolved deaths of Sri Lankan citizens during the 1980s, one of the darkest periods in the nation's history. The novel opens by giving the description of an afterlife office, but it seems so real like a real-world setting, “the afterlife is a tax office and everyone wants their rebate” (Karunathilaka 7). “You are in a queue, shouting at a woman in a white sari seated behind a fiberglass counter” (Karunathilaka 5).

Karunathilaka conveys the story through the ghosts of slaughtered individuals with dismembered limbs and blood-stained garments. Because it is part historical fiction, it is heavy with exposition. But characters remain an adornment to the world or the historical backdrop. The protagonist’s chats with dead lawyer, dead atheist, dead revolutionaries, dead doctor, dead bodyguard, dead priest, dead suicides, dead dogs, dead tourists, dead leopard all point towards death after life which seems to be magic realistic in its very nature. “The dead atheist looks out to the Beira lake as if pondering afterlives and things undone” (Karunathilaka 20).

The novel is presented in second person point of view, thus the magical elements in the novel intersect with realistic narrative. The reader will feel like he/she is experiencing it. Especially when Maali dive into the river of birth, one could experience it through the

narrative. In reality, a person who is reading this novel will feel like he/she is living it from the shoes of Maalinda Kabalani Almeida.

Karunatilaka presents the history of the war in Sri Lanka in the voices of those whose bodies have been violated and who bear scars of loss, absence, and rejection. The narrative, using the character of Maali, incorporates the life experiences of numerous individuals who have also died during the war. Hutcheon refers to a form of fiction that does not aim to provide an objective account of a nation-state's history or a grand narrative. Instead, this form of fiction utilizes various voices and perspectives to narrate the stories of pain and suffering experienced by people and can be seen as a metafictional approach to historiography (Hutcheon, "Canadian" 230). The Dead Atheist, while answering the query of where Maali would find his dead body, says, "The same place the flame goes when you snuff it...The mother and daughter buried under bricks in Kilinochchi, the ten students burned on tyres in Malabe, the planter was tied to a tree with entrails, none of them went anywhere" (Karunatilaka 12). The philosophic language and description of violence by the atheist reflect despair and horror.

The novel often refers to events from the civil war, particularly the massacre of Tamils in 1983, which Maali has photographed. *Seven Moons* has been described by the author as a ghost story and in addition to the history lesson and the expose of the corruption, repression and factionalism which characterized the authorities at that time, it is said to weave in myth. The ghost narrator in Karunatilaka's work narrates his tale with deftness and vivacity, using sardonic humour and ominous details of the 1980s Tamil massacre in Sri Lanka. The book specifically addresses the horrifying atrocities committed during the Tamil pogrom in July 1983, when hundreds of Tamil citizens were brutally murdered and set ablaze in their homes and on the streets during a clash between the government, military, Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), and Marxist radicals. Maali had photographs of

all the atrocities that could bring the government down. Thus, it is a work which explore the cultural and historical context of srilanka by deploying magic realism in his narrative.

Third characteristic feature with regard to magic realism is authorial reticence. Authorial reticence means deliberate withholding of information about magical elements. That means no initial description is given about the fantastical element, thus it blends with reality and it seems too realistic for the author “You are about to launch a rant of expletives when you notice it once more, the figure wrapped in black garbage, beckoning with both hands. Its eyes flicker like candles and it is holding what looks like your missing sandal” (Karunathilaka 14). This figure is a magical figure which appears in front of the protagonist.

Plentitude in the novel refers to the plentiful description of details which make this novel so realistic and believable. “She glares at you with reddening eyes. Her sari has been singed and clings to her like a cellophane. Her skin has the wrinkle of crackling pork the only dish that DD could make better than your ammas cook kamala, under whose bed your life’s work gather dust” (Karunathilaka 71) “In the flickering moonlight her skin looks made from snake. Her arms weave like cobras, her hair writhes like a nest of serpents and the burns on her skin glow like embers” (Karunathilaka 72). These are some of the descriptions about a woman who was burnt alive.

Hybridity is yet another feature associated with magic realism. Hybridity refers to use of multiple planes of reality, sometimes it may be contrasting in nature. Here, in this novel hybridity can be seen in the protagonist Maali itself. “In the context of the novel, ethnic identity is depicted as a weapon to exclude, torture, and kill those perceived as a threat to the dominant ideology of majoritarian homogeneity. This ideology is linked to a Buddhist-Sinhala identity, and those who do not fit into this identity are targeted for violence. The novel shows how the idea of ethnic identity is manipulated to justify these actions, with those who are perceived as “other” being subjected to discrimination and

violence. Similarly, one of the suspected reasons for Maali's death has been his hybrid Sinhalese-Tamil identity. Maali knows the dangers of his identity, and for this reason, he probably asserts his national identity instead of his ethnic one:

‘Malinda, your mother is Tamil?’

‘Half-Burgher, half-Tamil.’

‘And your father?’

‘Passed away three years ago. He was Sinhala.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. So what are you?’

‘A Sri Lankan.’ (Karunatilaka 232)

He has been reminded over and over again that he is fortunate that his father has given him the Sinhalese surname, which is now providing him security.”

In conclusion, "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida" masterfully employs elements of magical realism to create a rich and immersive narrative that explores themes of history, identity, and the supernatural within the context of Sri Lanka's tumultuous past. Through fantastical elements, real-world settings, authorial reticence, plenitude, hybridity, and political critique, Karunathilaka crafts a captivating story that blurs the boundaries between reality and imagination.



## Chapter 3

### Cultural and Historical Context

In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Shehan Karunatilaka masterfully intertwines themes such as the Sri Lankan civil war and its accompanying violence, love in its various forms, including the exploration of homosexuality, passion, dedication, the intrinsic value of life, suicide, and the pervasive presence of corruption. These themes are not merely presented but are vividly brought to life through the lens of magic realism. Within the fabric of the narrative, magical elements seamlessly blend with the exploration of these themes, adding depth and dimension to the story.

This novel is written in the backdrop of Sri Lankan civil war and it very well explains the atrocities and violence associated with war. It describes the reasons and causes of civil war which happened in Sri Lanka during 1980s, the narration of the novel makes it so interesting even though it consists of many massacres and bloodsheds.

“Government is fighting the JVP and bodies are piling high. I fully get it. You must be busy these days. I understand.’

‘These days?’ The woman in white scowls and shakes her head “There’s a corpse every second. Sometimes two. Did you get your ears checked?” (Karunatilaka 8)

Karunatilaka conveys the story through the ghosts of slaughtered individuals with dismembered limbs and blood-stained garments. “The mother’s hair is caked in blood which stains her dress and smears her face” (Karunatilaka 6). Because it is part historical fiction, it is heavy with exposition. But characters remain an adornment to the world or the historical backdrop.

Love is another theme which the novel deals with. The love of a mother can be seen through Laxmi Almeida’s character. “Madam, why don’t you all go home and see if he

comes back. You think we're here for a joke?' Snarls Amma. 'He called me yesterday. We haven't spoken in months. Said he wanted to meet for lunch. Which he never does. Something wasn't right. I knew it then.'" (Karunatilaka 57)

His novel is set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war and provides a comprehensive depiction of the atrocities and violence associated with war. It effectively explores the reasons and causes behind the civil war that took place in Sri Lanka during the 1980s. Despite containing numerous massacres and bloodshed, the novel's narration is captivating and engaging. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Shehan Karunathilaka skillfully weaves together various themes, such as the Sri Lankan civil war and its associated violence, different forms of love, including the exploration of homosexuality, passion, dedication, the intrinsic value of life, suicide, and the pervasive presence of corruption. These themes are not simply presented, but are vividly brought to life through the lens of magical realism.

Within the narrative, the magical elements seamlessly blend with the exploration of these themes, adding depth and dimension to the story.

This novel is set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, providing a detailed explanation of the atrocities and violence that occurred during that time. It delves into the reasons and causes of the civil war, which took place in Sri Lanka during the 1980s. Despite the inclusion of numerous massacres and bloodshed, the narration of the novel remains captivating and engaging.

Karunathilaka effectively conveys the story through the ghosts of those who were slaughtered, depicting them with dismembered limbs and blood-stained garments. The impact of the war is evident in the description of a mother whose hair is caked in blood, staining her dress and smearing her face. As a historical fiction, the novel contains a significant amount of exposition, but the characters serve as an embellishment to the world and historical backdrop.

"The government is engaged in a fierce battle with the JVP, resulting in a high number of casualties. I understand that you must be occupied during these times," I acknowledge. "These days?" The woman in white scowls and shakes her head. "There's a dead body every second, sometimes even two. Have you had your ears checked?"

(Karunatilaka 8)

The novel "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida" by Shehan Karunathilaka is situated within the context of the Sri Lankan civil war, offering a thorough portrayal of the brutalities and aggression associated with warfare. It effectively examines the underlying reasons and triggers of the civil war that transpired in Sri Lanka in the 1980s. Despite the presence of multiple massacres and violence, the storytelling in the novel is enthralling and immersive. Karunathilaka adeptly intertwines various themes in the narrative, including the Sri Lankan civil war and its violent repercussions, diverse forms of love encompassing exploration of homosexuality, passion, commitment, the intrinsic worth of life, suicide, and the prevalent corruption. These themes are not merely presented but vividly brought to life through the lens of magical realism. The incorporation of magical elements seamlessly merges with the exploration of these themes, enriching the story with depth and complexity.

The novel explores the distressing backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, vividly depicting the horrors and brutality that accompany such conflicts. It offers a comprehensive account of the causes and triggers behind the civil war that devastated Sri Lanka in the 1980s. Despite the grim subject matter of numerous massacres and bloodshed, the storytelling is captivating and engrossing.

Version 1: The novel delves into the haunting context of the Sri Lankan civil war, skillfully portraying the atrocities and violence that are inseparable from such conflicts. It provides a meticulous examination of the factors and catalysts that led to the civil war, which ravaged Sri Lanka during the 1980s. Despite the somber nature of the subject matter, which includes numerous massacres and bloodshed, the narrative remains compelling and

captivating.

Karunatilaka skillfully conveys the story through the ghosts of those who were brutally slaughtered, with dismembered limbs and blood-stained clothing. "The mother's hair is matted with blood, which leaves stains on her dress and smears on her face" (Karunatilaka 6). As a work of historical fiction, the novel contains a significant amount of exposition. However, the characters serve as embellishments to the world and the historical context. Because when Maali went missing, his mother was highly concerned about him and went to police station in search of him, she even bribed the police in order to find her son. The love of father is best portrayed through the Stanley Dharmendran's character. Even Stanley Dharmendran killed Maali Almeida, in order to save DD from unnatural relationship. Love of a friend is portrayed through Jaki's character.

The novel delves into the harrowing backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, vividly portraying the atrocities and violence that come hand in hand with such conflicts. It provides a detailed account of the reasons and triggers behind the civil war that ravaged Sri Lanka in the 1980s. Despite the grim subject matter of numerous massacres and bloodshed, the narrative is compelling and engaging.

example of homosexual relationship portrayed in the novel.

The novel explicitly illustrates the protagonist as a war photographer. Despite his demise, Maali's primary concern revolves around his photographs, as he believes they possess the ability to overthrow the government. However, he eventually realizes that his affection for Jacki and DD surpasses the importance of his work. The narrative emphasizes the significance of life, shedding light on the tragic loss of lives during the civil war. Through various characters, the novel reinforces the idea of cherishing life. As the protagonist aptly puts it, "When they chop your corpse, it doesn't matter if you're Marxist or café Marxist. Grass-roots socialist or champagne socialist. The flies will shit on you and the maggots will munch" (Karunatilaka 52). Following his passing, Maali finds himself at the

death office counter, where Dr. Ranee informs him that he must traverse seven moons to reach the Light. Another significant theme discussed in the novel is about the passion and dedication one should have in life. The protagonist of the novel Maali Almeida is an excellent photographer. His dedication and passion towards photography is highly remarkable.

“For the first month, you were hardly at home. You were photographing captured arsenals for Major Raja Udugampola, covering the Anuradhapura bomb blast with Andy McGowan from Newsweek, and beating your losing streak at Pegasus Casino.” (Karunatilaka 69).

The novel explicitly portrays that he was a war photographer. In this novel, even after his own death what concerns Maali the most is his photographs, he wants it to be exhibited as he believed that his works has the power to bring down the government. But he realizes his love for Jacki and DD is more important for him than his photographs.

Karunatilaka effectively communicates the narrative by utilizing the spirits of those who were brutally murdered, their dismembered limbs and blood-soaked garments serving as haunting reminders. According to Karunatilaka (6), "The mother's hair is tangled with blood, leaving stains on her dress and smudges on her face." As a piece of historical fiction, the novel contains a substantial amount of exposition. However, the characters serve as embellishments to the world and the historical context. When Maali disappeared, his mother became deeply worried and resorted to visiting the police station in her search for him. She even resorted to bribing the police in order to locate her son. The love of a father is most effectively portrayed through the character of Stanley Dharmendran. Even though Stanley Dharmendran killed Maali Almeida to protect DD from an unnatural relationship, his actions are driven by love. The love of a friend is depicted through the character of Jaki.

The novel delves into the distressing backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, vividly

illustrating the atrocities and violence that accompany such conflicts. It provides a comprehensive account of the causes and triggers behind the civil war that devastated Sri Lanka in the 1980s. Despite the grim subject matter of numerous massacres and bloodshed, the narrative remains captivating and engrossing.

The novel signifies the value of life. Because of civil war, many people lost their lives, this pathetic reality is depicted through the novel. The whole novel by deploying the use of different characters reasserts the readers about the value of life. The protagonist says, “When they chop your corpse, it doesn’t matter if you’re Marxist or café Marxist. Grass-roots socialist or champagne socialist. The flies will shit on you and the maggots will munch” (Karunatilaka 52). In the novel, Maali after his death waits at death office counter and Dr. Raneer tells him he has to go through seven moons to attain Light.

The novel contains the recurring theme of suicide in it. “Your tree gets crowded with suicides muttering. Suicides are the easiest to spot, after the pretas; their eyes are yellowy green, their necks are often broken, and they always chatter, though only to themselves” (Karunatilaka 253)

## Chapter 4

### Major Themes, Symbols, and Motifs

There are many motifs and symbols associated with this novel. They are mara tree, Mahakali, crow man, Nikon camera, Moons, light, cards etc. Mara tree is a tree which is of high significance in the novel. "Māra in Buddhism is a demon that challenged the Buddha as he sought enlightenment under the bodhi tree. Māra, also known as "Lord of the Senses" or "Lord of Death" is representative of evil and the darker forces of the human condition that lead one away from attaining a spiritual life." In the novel, Mara tree is a place where the spirits can rest and find winds for their travel. "The mara tree stretches its limbs across shaggy grass and toppled rock", (Karunatilaka 53) "Mara trees catch winds" (Karunatilaka 53). In Buddhism, overcoming Mara is a representation of defeating one's inner temptations, such as ego, that hinder enlightenment.

The novel also features the motif of playing cards, which holds significant importance throughout the story. Maali, the main character, organizes his photographs according to different cards. "Thank you, my darling, you whisper.' Now go find the King and Queen" (Karunatilaka 234). "The negatives are with the king and Queen, little girl. It's now or never. Go find the records. You know where" (234). "If you could speak, you would've told them that the answer was the king of clubs, Major Raja Udugampola" (Karunatilaka 61). "The Queen of Spades. The lady with dark skin, darker eyes, red lipstick and a redder pottu" (Karunatilaka 76). Hence, playing cards serve as a crucial symbol in the novel.

Mahakali is another significant motif used in this novel. According to Hindu mythology "Maa Kali is considered the Goddess of death and destruction. But this shouldn't be taken at a literal level. Kali symbolizes the death of ego, of the inherent selfish

worldview of human beings and with the destruction of the material ego, she paves the way for Moksha or liberation of the soul. Goddess Kali can be seen killing many demons in stories of Hindu mythology. It's also a symbolic representation of the overcoming of the demons of the soul that devotees can overcome by worshipping Maa Kali." "A demon cannot devour you unless you invite it. At least, not before your seven moons." (Karunatilaka 170). "In the middle of the shrine is a painting of a demon, crude and cartoon-like, in a Tibetan style of drawing, not usually seen in our lane of Buddhism. You recognize the black eyes, the fangs and the serpent hair. You look from the necklace of skulls to the belt of fingers to the faces trapped in its flesh" (Karunatilaka 189) "Its teeth are as black as its eyes, and when its mouth grows wider you see its black tongue and the eyes peering from its throat" (Karunatilaka 296). "The Mahakali leaps from the tree and you dive into the whirlpool, and the last thing you feel is a claw being dragged across your spine" (Karunatilaka 394). "Maruwa, Maha Sona, Kalu Balla, Kuveni. I know it as the Mahakali, the swallower of souls." (Karunatilaka 47)

Crow Man is yet another significant figure or symbol used in the novel. Crow man is portrayed as a person who can communicate with ghosts through the practice of black magic. "Patience, hamu. We sit in this tree and wait for Crow uncle's call. It will come" (Karunatilaka 195). "Even the Crow Man can't protect your uncle forever" (Karunatilaka 144). These are some of the excerpts from the novel which discusses about crow man.

Moons play a significant role as a symbol in this novel. Maali must pass through seven moons to reach enlightenment. In Hinduism, the moon holds great importance as it symbolizes various aspects of creation, life, emotions, mood, and mind. It is associated with romance, pleasant nights, intense moments, loneliness, and mood swings. The recurring theme of moons in the novel enhances the magical realism of the overall narrative. The concept of light is also crucial in the story, symbolizing enlightenment. The Helpers in White are described as souls who have visited the Light and chosen to return. In Buddhist texts,



light is a metaphor for enlightenment and understanding of truth. Buddhas and bodhisattvas emitting light signify enlightenment, which is what Maali achieves in the novel.

Playing cards are yet another significant motif used in the novel by the author. Even Maali, the protagonist of the novel segregated his photographs on the basis of cards. “Thank you, my darling, you whisper.’ Now go find the King and Queen” (Karunatilaka 234). “The negatives are with the king and Queen, little girl. It’s now or never. Go find the records. You know where” (234). “If you could speak, you would’ve told them that the answer was the king of clubs, Major Raja Udugampola” (Karunatilaka 61). “The Queen of Spades. The lady with dark skin, darker eyes, red lipstick and a redder pottu” (Karunatilaka 76). Thus, cards are an important symbol used in the novel.

Camera used by Maali is yet another symbol; which finds significance in the novel. “It was the same Nikon 3ST that you see around your neck now, but that one worked. You could do nothing but shoot and that made you feel like you weren’t doing nothing. You clicked her being dragged by the hair and doused in petrol. And, right when the match was lit, the Nikon jammed” (Karunatilaka 71). Maali wears this camera all throughout his journey towards light. Camera signifies that he is a photographer by his profession. His love for camera can be seen throughout the novel as he doesn’t change it even though it gets damaged at the time of his death.

Light plays a pivotal role in the novel, symbolizing enlightenment. The author portrays light as a source of awakening and understanding of truth. According to the Dead Lawyer, the Helpers in White are volunteers who have experienced the Light and chosen to return. This concept aligns with the Buddhist texts, where light is a metaphor for enlightenment and is associated with Buddhas and bodhisattvas. When Maali attains light, he achieves enlightenment in the novel. Another important character in the story is Crow Man, who possesses the ability to communicate with spirits through dark magic. The novel includes several quotes that emphasize the significance of Crow Man. Moons also hold

symbolic meaning in the narrative, representing enlightenment and various emotions. Overall, the concept of light is crucial in symbolizing enlightenment, as demonstrated through the portrayal of The Helpers in White. Additionally, playing cards serve as a significant motif in the novel, with Maali organizing his photographs based on different cards.

The novel also explores the significance of the Crow Man, a prominent character and symbol. The Crow Man possesses the ability to communicate with spirits through the practice of black magic. In the book, there are excerpts that highlight the role of the Crow Man, such as when he is mentioned as someone who cannot protect a certain individual indefinitely. These instances shed light on the importance of the Crow Man in the narrative. Moons are represented as a significant symbol in this novel. There are seven moons which Maali has pass in order to attain light. In Hinduism, the moon has a great significance. “It represents many aspects of creation, life, emotions, mood and mind as these are all governed by the Moon. This planet is also associated with romance, pleasant nights, intense moment, loneliness and mood swings.” The repeated use of moons in the novel adds beauty to the overall theme of the novel from the perspective of magic realism. “You know, Stanley. This is Sri Lanka’s worst time. My astrologer says it is a black moon. A rahu or apale time. Karunatilaka” (256).

Light is a crucial motif used by the author. Light is portrayed as enlightenment in the novel. “According to the Dead Lawyer, the Helpers in White are volunteers. Souls who have visited the Light and opted to come back here” (Karunatilaka 72). “In canonical Buddhist texts, light is an important metaphor for enlightenment, meaning awakening or the understanding of truth. The emission of light by Buddhas and bodhisattvas (enlightened beings) is often described, and light is included, in Buddha names, such as the Buddha of Infinite.” Thus, when Maali attains light, he gets enlightenment as per the novel. Crow Man

is a prominent figure in the novel, depicted as someone who possesses the ability to communicate with spirits through the use of dark magic. The novel includes various quotes that highlight the significance of Crow Man in the story. Moons also hold a symbolic role in the narrative, representing enlightenment and various emotions. The concept of light is crucial in symbolizing enlightenment, as seen through the portrayal of The Helpers in White. Additionally, playing cards serve as a significant motif in the novel, with Maali organizing his photographs based on different cards.

Karunatilaka's narrative unfolds with a remarkable momentum, progressively delving deeper into the societal afflictions of his homeland. His prose skillfully portrays the complexities of Sri Lanka while drawing parallels with the literary giants of magical realism, akin to the works of Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez. Through his adept storytelling, Karunatilaka seamlessly intertwines elements of magical realism within the thematic, motivational, and symbolic layers of the novel. The result is a compelling interplay where fantastical elements harmonize with profound themes, motives, and symbols, enriching the narrative tapestry. With each page turned, the reader is immersed in a world where the extraordinary intersects with the mundane, inviting contemplation on the intricate interplay between reality and illusion.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams delineates the essence of 'Magic Realism,' describing it as a blend of sharply etched realism with fantastic and dreamlike elements, drawn from myth and fairy tales. Coined by German art critic Franz Roh in the 1920s, the term initially found application in visual arts but later permeated literature. The common characteristic features of magic realism include fantastical realism elements, real-world settings, authorial reticence, plenitude, hybridity, metafiction, heightened awareness of mystery, and political critique.

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka is a novel that infuses elements of magical realism within its narrative. The story is set during the Sri Lankan Civil War and follows Maali Almeida, a war photographer, gambler, and closeted homosexual, who wakes up dead in the afterlife. Set in 1980s Colombo, Sri Lanka, the narrative transcends conventional boundaries by intertwining Maali's experiences in the Afterlife, termed the In Between, with the real-world setting. Throughout the novel, Karunatilaka creatively manipulates point of view, structure, and form, challenging conventional notions of the novelistic plot line.

The magical elements are woven into the themes of the novel in several ways: Maali finds himself in what seems like a celestial visa office, a fantastical representation of the afterlife that reflects bureaucratic processes. The novel is populated with ghosts in various states of decay, including animal ghosts that can communicate, adding a layer of magical realism to the story. Maali has seven moons to contact the people he loves most and lead them to a hidden cache of photos that could change the course of Sri Lanka's history. This time-bound mission from beyond the grave adds a supernatural dimension to his quest. While the mystery of Maali's death drives the plot, the magical elements underscore the

romance and the connections between characters that transcend life and death. The novel merges magical realism with a ghost story, a whodunnit, and a state-of-the-nation piece, creating a rich tapestry of genres that highlight the magical aspects of the narrative. The magical elements serve to deepen the exploration of the novel's major themes, such as the value of human life, the impact of civil war, and the power of love and memory. They also contribute to the novel's satirical tone, providing a unique lens through which the reader can examine the complexities of Sri Lankan history and society

The major themes explored in the novel encompass homosexuality, the Sri Lankan civil war and violence, love, passion and dedication, the value of life, and corruption. Fantastical elements such as levitation, telepathy, and telekinesis contribute to the creation of a phantasmagorical world, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. Moreover, the real-world setting serves as the foundation of magic realism, seamlessly integrating magical elements into everyday life. Authorial reticence, evident in the deliberate withholding of information about magical elements, adds depth and intrigue to the narrative. Plenitude, characterized by the rich and detailed descriptions, enhances the realism of the novel, making it both immersive and believable. Hybridity, the juxtaposition of multiple planes of reality, enriches the narrative tapestry, offering contrasting perspectives and experiences. Metafiction, with its incorporation of stories within stories, adds layers of complexity to the novel, inviting readers to explore different levels of reality. Finally, political critique, implicit in the narrative, shines a light on societal issues and injustices, prompting reflection and analysis.

The novel also features numerous motifs and symbols, including the mara tree, Mahakali, crow man, Nikon camera, moons, light, and cards. The mara tree holds high significance, representing evil and the darker aspects of human nature. Mahakali, the Goddess of death and destruction, symbolizes the liberation of the soul from ego and

material desires. The seven moons symbolize enlightenment and the journey towards spiritual awakening. Light, depicted as a metaphor for enlightenment, signifies the understanding of truth and the attainment of wisdom. The motifs and symbols interwoven throughout the narrative deepen its meaning and provide insight into the characters' journeys.

In conclusion, "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida" stands as a testament to the power of magic realism in literature. The major characteristic features of magic realism and its explosion in the novel are clearly evident as the second chapter of this project provides ample examples from the text . The motifs, themes and symbols explained in the third chapter also helps to fulfil the main objective of this work. Thus, this project unveils the intricate elements of magic realism, making *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* a compelling and unforgettable literary work.

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