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KARUNATILAKA'S SATIRIC WORLD-BUILDING IN THE *SEVEN MOONS OF MAALI ALMEIDA*

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Abstract

Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker Prize-winning latest novel The Seven Moons of Maali Almeidaoffers a critique of the political system, corruption and ethnic violence prevailing in his home country since 1980s. The novel presents nauseating accounts of the horrific brutalities inflicted on the people by various political actors. What sets the narrative apart is itsabsurd, innovativeand ironic treatment of the subject. Karunatilaka devises an alternate world teeming with ghosts and other supernatural entities indirectly targeting political parties, terrorist organisations and the people of Sri Lanka. The titular protagonist Maali wakes up in the after worldat the beginning of the novel and finds himself in a kind of visa office which is the gateway to The Light. Maali embarks on a quest for truth, the truth of the circumstances leading to his death. He has only seven nights or moons to accomplish his goal. The paper examines the eschatological apparatus employed by the author to depict Maali's epic journey over land and the "in-between" which is replete with encounters and conversations with the dead and the alive.The conspicuous narrativetechnique and the incongruous style lay bare the shady operations of the political parties, terrorist organizations and government death squads.In addition, the paper undertakes a stylistic analysis of the novel to unravel the satiric craft of Karunatilaka and the extent to which he has been able to accomplish his goal.

Keywords

Sri Lanka, Civil War, Satire, Eschatology, Ghost, Afterlife, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida made it to the Booker Prize list in 2022 because of its technique and presentation. Karunatilaka is the first Sri Lankan to receive the Booker Prize for his novel. "What the judges admired and enjoyed in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* was the ambition of its scope and the hilarious audacity of its narrative techniques," says Neil MacGregor from the jury. Its clever witticism, eschatological apparatus, use of fantasy tropes and gripping plot overshadow its widely criticised dark humour and irreverent tone. The *Seven Moons* fuses three or more genres -- murder mystery, ghost story, historical novel, political satire, and supernatural thriller. This paper foregrounds the formal features of the political satireembedded in the concepts of theology. *The Seven Moons* is an indirect satire on various political actors who are collectively responsible for the Sri Lankan catastrophe. Karunatilaka's subject matter and plot highlight question and explore Sri Lanka's legacy – and its continued, difficult relationship with its civil war, which spanned from 1983 to 2009. The paper examines the unique narrative structure and various ingenious devices used by the author to bring home his point.

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Historical Background:

Sri Lanka was earlier known as the "pearl of the Indian Ocean" due to its sandy beaches, luxuriant vegetation and other-worldly landscape. Its ancient towns and monuments are a great temptation for tourists worldwide. Ironically it was termed a "land without sorrow" by the Chinese people. This image of Sri Lanka has been shattered by the continuum of violence and series of conflicts. The rise in political violence of unprecedented magnitude has put Sri Lanka on the world map. There have been intermittent bursts of violence beginning in 1977 and the country has been in a state of civil war since 1984. The government apparatus and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been struggling to prove their military might since then virtually dividing the country into two parts. "Militarization, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, draconian laws, torture, and further destruction by the parties involved continue unabated," observes Charles R. A. Hoole (Hoole, 96). The conflict intensified between the Tamils and Sinhalese and the civil war among various political actors and terrorist organisations escalated so much that all sense of who was fighting against or colluding with whom was lost. According to various national and international human rights organizations, thousands of Sri Lankans both Tamil and Sinhalese have been killed in the 26-year war that ended in 2009 with the government defeating the LTTE. The narrative of *The Seven Moons* revolves around the atrocities of the Tamil "pogrom" in July 1983, when hundreds of Tamil citizens were violently executed and burned to death in their homes and out in the streets in the violent confrontation between the LTTE, the government, the military, and the Marxist radicals.

Sri Lanka vs the Alternate World:

The greatest achievement of *The Seven Moons* is the creation of an alternate parallel world and the continuous weighing of one against the other. The protagonist Maali wakes up dead in the afterlife. The novel begins after his death when he wanders about in some bureaucratic setup feeling lost and out of place. It is ironic and shocking that the narrative unfolds from the point of view of a dead protagonist who speaks in the second person. The novel opens at an apocalyptic point when the worst has already happened. One of the dead revolutionary leaders, Sena laughs at the new entrants, "What are you scared of? You're already dead! The worst has already happened" (Karunatilaka, 40). Maali wonders if he has landed in some government office as he finds himself in a queue in front of a fibre glass counter, followed by souls with stained and broken bodies. The serpentine queue coils around pillars and crawls along the walls. The place looks like a car park with no cars, or a market space with nothing to sell. On the level of form, the reader undergoes a shock as the reality is represented through another world, as if the narrative refused to punctuate the relationship between this world and the other world. The norms, signs and directions to various places in the afterlife are embedded in the text in a different font. The concept of "world-building" is integral to the fantasy genre. The writer's imagination invents a world similar to, in varying degrees, our own, but which is understood as separate and therefore an "escape" from reality. When used for satire, the results are bewildering. A wide variety of political satires have used animal, mythical or supernatural characters and alternate worlds that act as foils to the imperfect world. "Whenever the 'other world' appears in satire, it appears as an ironic counterpart to our own, a reversal of accepted social standards" (Frye, 233). *The Seven Moons* shatters the kind of romanticism attached to the serious vision of the other world. The protagonist as well as the reader feels deceived as they are introduced to an alternate world which is contrary to their expectations. "The Afterlife is as confusing as the Before Death, the In Between is as arbitrary as the Down There. So, we make up stories because we're afraid of the dark (Karunatilaka, 197)."

This strange and absurd world elaborately described by the author is an expression of "creative exuberance", a term given by Frye to the third phase satire in his seminal work *Anatomy*

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of Criticism (2000). The afterlife has its own rules and regulations just like Sri Lankan bureaucratic system. "This secondary world is an alternate, fictional world that is internally consistent but not bound by the rules of the real, primary world" (Britton, 5-6). The fresh arrivals are appraised of its endless list of confusing and absurd norms. It looks like a typical government office where you have to wait till you forget why you came. "Even the afterlife is designed to keep the masses stupid… They make you forget your life and push you towards some light. All bourgeois tools of the oppressor. They tell you that injustice is part of some grand plan," says a boy escorting Maali to the office (Karunatilaka, 11). The striking resemblance between Sri Lanka and the afterlife is a genius ironic twist given by Karunatilaka to *The Seven Moons*. The office doors with "closed" signs, registration counters, record of one's deeds on Ola leaves, stamping of papers, overcrowding of the "in-between" and shortage of staff are reminiscent of Sri Lankan red tape. The admission procedure to the afterlife is circumlocutory and full of bureaucratic obfuscation. Souls go for ear checks at Level Forty-Two because their folds show past traumas, the lobes reveal sins, and the cartilage hides guilt. The spectacle of death and congregation of broken bodies is not as overwhelming as the uncanny similarity between the earth and this world. The author attacks the normalization of violence, powerlessness of people and the dismal climate of Sri Lanka through this parallelism. He establishes a structural paradox as he recalibrates his narrative structure, not to foreground a difference but to put special emphasis on the similarity of the absurd and chaotic world of reference to the apocalyptic world of Maali. This alternate world is inhabited by various supernatural entities ghosts, ghouls, pretas, yakas, Mahakali. Wind is the mode of transport by which Maali and other ghosts travel, taking them to every part of Colombo. They tend to hover close to their remains. Karunatilaka does not use the imaginary after world as an easy trick to just magic away plot problems.

> This place where the dead perambulate—the setting of this novel—has an uncanny resemblance to the "real" Sri Lanka, as much as novels can be said to represent "reality" within their covers. The murdered entities occupy every inch of Colombo, the main setting of the novel, and every other place in the novel, which has a certain peripatetic quality to it (Gayatri Devi).

The woman in white saree behind the fibre glass counter is making entries of the fresh arrivals which include all kinds --slain journalists, defiled beauty queens, tortured revolutionaries, murdered housewives, colonial slaves, victims of bombs, child soldiers and so on. When Maali complains that he was not supposed to be there, the woman answers, "Every excuse I have heard. No one wants to go, not even the suicides. You think I wanted to die? My daughters were eight and ten when they shot me. What to do? Complaining won't help. Be patient and wait your turn. Forgive what you can (Karunatilaka, 5)." Maali recognises her as Dr. Ranee Sridharan, the university lecturer slain by Tamil extremists for the crime of being a Tamil moderate. Here, the author refers to Dr. Rajni Thirangama who was shot dead by LTTE for her anti-terrorism stance. This world is a subversion of the established concept of the post-death world. Maali, who has a broken neck with a broken Nikon around it, does not remember how he died and has no urge to move towards the oblivion called 'The Light' unless he finds all the answers. He has seven moons to decide about his future or he would be stuck forever in the "in-between" with other ghosts and demons of various kinds. Andreas Kristiansenin his thesis "Subverting the Genre: Terry Pratchett's Disc world as a Critique of Heroic Fantasy" elaborates, "To be a worthwhile literary achievement, the Secondary world needs to possess an internal logic of natural laws, governing bodies, politics and geography. It can be fanciful and different from the one we know, but it has to seem plausible

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and real." He further argues that this plausibility is the key, allowing audiences to make meaningful connections between the secondary and primary worlds.

Maali's odyssey and correspondingly the novel is divided into seven sections, each standing for one of the moons of titular seven moons that the protagonist must cross to reach The Light. Essentially, the moons provide stages for the collision point between the living and the non-living, grounded in enough reality to make it recognizable and tampered with enough of the fantastic to elevate it above the mundane. The protagonist is suspended in the "in-between" which is filled with ghouls and demons who draw power from the despair of the dead. Comrade Sena works for Mahakali, the symbol of revenge and despair. Maali hobnobs and chats with the dead and exposes the culprits in the process. "A dead person functions as a "Horatian satirical character voice; his personality and unique perspective pair with humour to expose flaws and pose questions about human behaviour and social structures" (Britton, 11). He takes the reader along on this revelatory expedition. He also meets a shaman called the Crow Man, who is a middleman between ghouls and human beings. The dead fly, glide and drift along the wind, they can be seen riding the tops of planes, trains and cars, staying close to the living in their rooms, hovering around their beds, getting drawn to the left overs of their bodies rotting in the palaces of torture, jungles and polluted lakes and whispering in the ears of the living, eavesdropping on their conversations, responding to them and talking to each other.Mahvesh Murad holds that this style feeds off Vonnegut and Rushdie.

The Seven Moons benefits from an in-depth construction and well-used satire that engenders social commentary instead of simply poking fun at fantasy and apocalyptic tropes. Hence, the other world and its inhabitants become sites of meaningful dialogue and connection with the audience. Maali's conversations with other characters – dead or alive, at various stages of the after-death journey, mediators and his peek into the lives of the mortals lead to a great expose. In fact, the novel was earlier published as *Chats with the Dead* (2020). Many skeletons tumble out from the closets literally. Maali meets a lot of characters from his previous life. Despite admonitions of Dr. Sridharan, Maali gets carried away by the ghost of Sena Pathirana, a young Marxist radical murdered by the government, who is still talking revolution and revenge and raising an army of ghosts for this purpose. His body was dumped in the Beira Lake like Maali's.

The experimental and innovative narrative technique contains the sting. The narrative moves in flashbacks and effortlessly flows into and out of both worlds, of souls and human beings.The title of each chapter and the accompanying lines are indicators of the theme of the chapter. The chapter "First Moon" opens with an epigraph "Father, forgive them, for I will never" from the poem "Good Friday 1975" by the Sri Lankan poet and activist Richard de Zoysa. Zoysa was kidnapped and killed in February 1990 allegedly by death squads with high-level nexus with the government. The whole premise of writing about this mayhem is to keep the memory of the dead and the buried alive. That's why some of the dead refuse to move on and instead succumb to Mahakali's offer to take revenge. Karunatilaka indirectly critiques the culture of violence and despair in Sri Lanka. Maali's ghost becomes his voice. As a ghost, he has a vantage point. He can see events following his death unfolding before him. He wants to trace his murderer and the events that led to his murder. The only way he can contact the mortals is by whispering in their ears and appearing in their dreams. Here, the narrative veers towards a nail-biting murder mystery. Maali's flatmates and his mother report him missing and try to search for him with the help of the police. Another of his goals is to lead his flatmates DD and Jakito a cache of photos that he took during his clandestine violent operations organised by the government. Looking back at his past, he leads the readers into understanding the political climate of Sri Lanka. "Maali's photographs are a stand-in for Karunatilaka's novel itself; a forensic witnessing of the Sri Lankan holocaust," says reviewer Gayatri Devi. The pictures raise quite a sensation with who's who flocking the

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missing photographer's home. Maali naively believes that these exclusive and explosive photographs can topple the government and spark a revolution, bringing various people to book. The events leading to Maali's murder unfold like an anti-climax, as the motive of the murder is not political. The whodunit murder mystery is actually a digression from the author's intent, which is to expose the meaningless violence and complicity of Sri Lanka's various stakeholders. Maali was thrown off the roof of a hotel by DD's father Stanley Dharmendran, a minister, who wanted to put an end to the homosexual love affair between his son and Maali. Maali does not fall victim to any political conspiracy but is eliminated due to his relationship exemplifying the statement, "Most political murders have nothing to do with politics" (Karunatilaka, 13).

The eschatological symbolism and structure serve as both tool and the butt of the satire. It denounces escapist theology and demystifies and deconstructs the discourse of apocalypse. The apocalyptic discourse reflects paradoxically the opposition to existing political practices and political powerlessness to change them. The novel satirises apocalyptic eschatology that acts as the opium of masses giving them false hopes. "Karma is bullshit" (Karunatilaka, 240). Though the rules and regulations of this imaginary world mimic those of age-old eschatology and apocalyptic system, its false promises provoke the reader into a deep rethinking of his fears, attitudes and destiny. The promise of transcendence and justice in after life proves to be hollow. A fellow ghost laughs at Maali, "I bet you thought the afterlife was like an Air Lanka commercial? With golden beaches and elephants in costumes and tea pluckers grinning for the camera" (Karunatilaka, 13).

The narrative assumes a carnivalesque tone as the supernatural entities belonging to different hierarchical order engage in grotesque activities. Ghosts hover around the living trying either to protect or harm them on the earth. Their macabre appearance and concerns add to the shocking impact of the novel. The degradation of the social and political reality is reported in a comic mood that shocks the reader by the discrepancy it creates between the situation and its representation. While the exploration of the apocalyptic reality invites the readers to rediscover the corrupt social and political order where they live, the exploration of the post-apocalyptic world seeks to undermine the readers' complacency and challenge their attitude towards reality. Sena while addressing the ghosts says,

> If The Light is heaven, as this madam doc tells, and if the "in-between" is purgatory filled with the Lost, then what does that make the Down Below?
> Hell! Shouts someone in the crowd (Karunatilaka, 93).

The satiric provocation of the readers lies in the systematic use of the paradox as a trigger for deep rethinking of their certainties, their fears and their relation to the real. The apocalypse is but virtual and we are virtually living in the apocalypse; Jean Baudrillard elaborates on this point asserting that "virtually, we are in the apocalypse, you only have to see the devastation of the real world all around" (Baudrillard, 110). The narrative has a resemblance to the *Danse Macabre* where the ghosts and human beings intermingle freely and the life after death is robbed of its transcendence. The plot of *The Seven Moons* is deliberately devised to laugh at theology's posturing of extending salvation to the victims of violence."However, the attack is double-edged; it is directed against the powerful and the victims alike. Satire is thus subversive and punitive. It is also ironic as it invites the reader to be sceptical about all discourses, including the discourse of apocalypse" (Mohamed, 5).

Despite dealing heavily with the dead and death, the novel does not advocate "nothingness." "We must all find pointless causes to live for, or why bother with breath" (Karunatilaka, 363)? Maali asserts in the "Seventh Moon" that life cannot be equated with nothing. He ultimately decides to move toward the Light, conventional symbol for salvation.

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However, the author departs from apocalyptic absolutism and evades a clear definition of the Light. When Maali asks the doctor its meaning in the beginning, she replies ambiguously, "Whatever You Need It To Be." The novel concludes with Maali choosing the Light that signifies oblivion and forgetfulness at best.

This narrative layering has been done throughout the novel with the voices of the living and the dead alternating in the same place and time. It gives rise to the possibility that negotiations and exchanges taking place in an invisible realm guide what is happening in the visible world. "Humans believe they make their own thoughts and possess their own will. This is yet another placebo that we swallow after birth. Thoughts are whispers that come from without as well as within" (Karunatilaka 344). Maali wonders if his thoughts were actually the whispers of a ghost. This world is so designed as to bring out the distortions of truth, expose the persecution, torture and massacre of Sri Lankans.

> We live in an age of invented, alternate worlds. Tolkien's Middle-earth, Rowling's Hogwarts, the dystopic universe of "The Hunger Games," the places where vampires and zombies prowl: These places are having their day. Yet despite the vogue for fantasy fiction, in the finest of literature's fictional microcosms, there is more truth than fantasy. (Rushdie)

The achievement of the author lies in merging the two worlds seamlessly, his ability to create a world of ghosts, ghouls and spirits without letting go of their earthly connection. This extended world building using Sri Lankan mythology and folklore render the text ambiguous at times but never fail to give intellectual pleasure to the reader.

Conclusion:

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida is apolitical satire that brings out the nuanced portrayal of the organised and unorganised violence during the Sri Lankan crisis. Karunatilaka weaves the complex narrative of the satire using tropes of apocalypse and fantasy to reflect on our own world. Juxtaposing conventions of the apocalyptic world-building and fantasy genre with satire, the author retranslates social criticisms of the real world, inspiring laughter and thoughtful reflection in his audience. While the two worlds are continuously weighed, compared and intertwined, readers are enlightened and shocked in equal measure. Though it is difficult to pin down the novel and categorise it yet the whole edifice of *The Seven Moons* is built on the foundation of eschatology. Karunatilaka's protagonist moves about in the afterlife, places akin to purgatory and hell, along with all kinds of supernatural entities, but the narrative is not confined to the territory of the fantastic. It exhumes the unhistorical dead, presents the gory details of their killing, demands accountability and indicts all the participants in the Sri Lankan carnage. Using a combination of fantasy and eschatological modes of representation and excremental diction, the author is able to represent a reality which is too harsh to be encompassed within the boundaries of conventional realism**.** Northrop Frye has rightly said**,** "A slight shift of perspective, a different tinge in the emotional colouring, and the solid earth becomes an intolerable horror" (Karunatilaka, 235).

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