
Haunted Histories and Wounded Time: Subaltern Mourning and Postcolonial Resistance in The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1548>

Abstract

This article examines Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* through the critical lenses of postcolonial theory and Derridean hauntology in order to explore how spectrality functions as a kind of historical critique and ethical resistance in post-conflict Sri Lanka. In the context of civil war, political repression, and forced forgetting, the book explores suppressed histories, silenced voices, and unresolved collective trauma through the ghost of the murdered photojournalist Maali Almeida. Drawing from Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, the study argues that the novel subverts linear temporality through what is called "wounded time," a temporal condition in which the past persistently invades the present and rejects the closure or reconciliation imposed by narratives supported by the state. The analysis highlights the limitations of postcolonial transitional justice and the weakness of official historiography by demonstrating how the novel's haunting blurs the boundaries between presence and absence, life and death. By transforming the afterlife into a political arena where repressed truths, forgotten memories, and unacknowledged grief resurface, Maali's spectral journey becomes a sort of subaltern testimony. Photography and storytelling are counter-archival practices that preserve truth outside of institutional control and uphold the ethical necessity of remembrance. The article concludes by arguing that *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* presents a hauntopolitical vision in which remembering becomes a civic duty and mourning becomes an act of resistance. The novel reimagines postcolonial healing as a process that necessitates listening to history's ghosts rather than silencing them by emphasizing the voices of the deceased and vanished.

Key Words: Postcolonial Trauma, Spectral Memory, Transitional Justice, Subaltern Testimony, Collective Mourning

1. Introduction

Over the past ten years, hauntology has achieved multi-disciplinary lodgement, moving from literary criticism to cultural theory, to the rereading of postcolonial archives. One way to consider hauntology is the way societies accommodate trauma and conscript amnesia. In postcolonial contexts, the specter is the shadow of lingering, colonial and neocolonial violence that remains, undigested, within the body of the present. Avery Gordon, Nicolas Abraham, and Esther Peeren, among others, have furthered the conversation of submerged, subaltern, and erased voices that refuse to be quiet, circling back to haunt the official narratives. In this regard, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is much more than a haunt

narrative. It performs a spectral politics that articulates the inadequacies of transitional justice and exposes the mnemonic epistemology that a postcolonial nationalist narrative seeks to hide. This article explores how Shehan Karunatilaka uses spectrality to critique the post-war reconciliation process in Sri Lanka and to contest censorship and ideological repression. Employing a Derridean hauntological approach, it seeks to uncover how the novel obliterates boundaries between the living and the dead, the seen and the unseen, the said and the silenced. Karunatilaka's spectral aesthetics, as argued here, extend beyond a narrative device, forming a dissensual political act that challenges dominant historical narratives by forging a fractured space for counter-memory, mourning, and ethical address. As post-truth politics and the manipulation of history surge, Karunatilaka's novel suggests the interrogation of the spectral in literature and its capacity to bear witness to the past that has been ghosted. The narratives of the dead, it seems, never entirely leave. Their haunting, silenced, and repressed tales demand acknowledgment and not permit themselves to be silenced.

The postcolonial literature and fiction of a society have made a significant contribution to the examination and unearthing of previously unrecorded violence. Sri Lanka, and particularly its recent fiction, is a case of a significant absence of literary scholarship that investigates the spectrality of the 'unconscious' and its layers, and asks how the fiction does an ethical and provocative work of the conscience around memory, justice, and the inescapable, unresolved burden of history. In South Asia's post-conflict literary studies, Derrida's hauntology, while prevalent, remains a valuable critical approach for literary and philosophical studies in the West. This gap in the literature is addressed by first applying Derridean hauntology to expose Karunatilaka's novel's political spectres. This also showcases haunting as a politicized practice of resistance, collective in a polity of spectral afterlives, and haunting as a political practice of collective remembrance and consent. Within the minimal context of cultural production in post-war Sri Lanka, the inquiry shows that, within the lexicon of reconciliation, fiction is a means of resistance against the fortification of ghosted memories and dissenting historiography, a counter to the sovereign erasure of the past that lies under reconciliation. In the field of modern postcolonial studies, ghosts appear as figures of political insistence, demanding confrontation with unresolved histories and collective trauma. Among this new body of work, Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) is a Booker Prize winner and occupies a key position. The late 1980s Sri Lankan civil war backdrop of the novel focuses on the ghost of assassinated photojournalist Maali Almeida as he travels through a twisted, hallucinatory purgatory, trying to figure out the circumstances of his death and a way to escape the hell of silence surrounding the horrors trapped in his lens. The novel's ghostly protagonist and the country's civil war memories sustain an ethical interrogation of the politics of amnesty, violence of the state, and the erasure of dissent. The nation's chronic aversion to its historical oversight and its unfulfilled duty to commemorate and abandon its memories haunts Karunatilaka's narrative, which is set against Sri Lanka's civil war, repeating devastated landscapes of ethnic violence and deteriorating governance. The absence of the mass killings of Sri Lanka that Karunatilaka seeks to reactivate through reanimated bodies that bear witness to and suffer the withering of memory. The past, within the national narrative, becomes a witness that is disavowed and haunts the collective memory. Recently, the concept of spectral politics, that is, the politics of ghosts, hauntings, and the returns of the repressed, has been incorporated into postcolonial and trauma studies. Framing the analysis within a Derridean hauntological lens, the essay seeks to contribute to postcolonial literary critique and spectral theory by showing the ways in which a novel can imaginatively recollect and reshape a fractured legacy of violence to serve the ideals of memory, justice, and truth.

2. Literature Review

The primary purpose of the section is to situate the novel within the current discussions surrounding the literary treatment of historical trauma, systemic violence, and the ethics of remembrance in the literature. It traces the spectral figure in recent scholarship and illustrates how the ghost, instead of being a simple

lateral deviation, has become a politically loaded signifier in postcolonial and trauma scholarship. Contemporary literary studies increasingly focus on questions of spectrality in relation to historical ruptures caused by wars, genocides, and colonialisms that do not settle into a static absence. For example, Avery Gordon argues that haunting signals the persistence of unassimilated social violence, stating that “haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt” (Gordon, 2008). This literature review seeks to construct an interdisciplinary and intertextual framework. First, it situates Karunatilaka’s novel within the detailed history and the literary landscape of Sri Lanka. Next, it follows the figure of the spectral within the pertinent literary traditions before engaging with Derrida’s theory of hauntology. The spectral return is examined through the prisms of postcolonial theory and subaltern theory. Sri Lankan Literature in English engages with the impact of colonialism and the challenges of nation-building post-independence (Salgado, 2007; Gordon, 2008). Narratives featuring ghosts and spectral figures in South Asian literature often emerge in response to political crisis and repression (Nazir, 2025). Bowers (2012) observes that “in postcolonial fiction, the ghost often embodies ‘the return of the repressed’,” reappearing when certain truths or experiences are excluded from the official historiography (Bowers, 2012, p. 13). Over the years and decades, the ghost has mutated from the folk ghost of the story to the representation of a collective trauma, historical erasures, repressed and subaltern voices and repressive power. While traditional ghost narratives centred on themes of mortal dread, familial retribution, and guilt, the twenty-first century, especially in trauma and postcolonial studies, has focused on more sociopolitical and ethical aspects in fiction. These reworked ghosts of the twenty-first century move away from the metaphors of the closet and the graveyard and towards the archives of violence and the silences that surround the voiceless. Thus, modern ghosts demand the living to acknowledge narratives of the dead, and in some instances, to repair. Spectrality portrays a suppressed narrative that, in the dominant order of memory, has sought to be concealed, suppressed, or erased (Nazir, 2025; Bowers, 2012, p. 13). This construction of spectrality in narrative form is increasingly relevant in literatures of the postcolonial or post-conflict order, where the ghosts of traumatic history speak to the silences of sanctioned accounts. These works testify to violence, erasure, and the betrayal of history. Rather than becoming figures of terror, the ghosts are testimony. Postcolonial and post-conflict literature are specifically relevant in addressing spectrality as sanctioned accounts often marginalize or falsify the lives of ghostly subordinated groups (Elston, 2024). In postcolonial narratives, the spectral return most often indicates the unrelenting aftermath of violent colonial legacies, civil war, and genocide. As Banerjee (2014) summarizes, “ghosts serve as witnesses to incomplete mourning, traumatic history, and cultural erasure” (Banerjee, 2014, p. 96). As Blanco and Peeren point out, this kind of hauntology positions “the ghost as a mediator of memory and history” (2010, p. 6) and thus reveals the way texts spiral around gaps, absences, and returns that are ghostly. These absences are not gaps in the logic of a plot, but rather the way trauma and injustice are understood and dealt with in a text. (Elston, 2024; Banerjee, 2014, p. 96; Blanco and Peeren, 2010, p. 6).

1.1 Application of Hauntology in Postcolonial Literary Discourse

With the coexistence of hauntology and postcolonial literature, there is an opportunity to analyze the extent to which colonial inhumanity, historical violence, and cultural erasure continue to shadow the present. It is common for postcolonial narratives to deal with the ‘ghosts’ of the empire’s absences, silences, and the ignored forces and voices within a national narrative that remain unresolved or suppressed. In this situation, hauntology helps to determine the extent to which colonialism is still experienced in formerly colonized nations as a culture, a politics, and a psychology. As elaborated by Jacques Derrida in (1994), hauntology also emphasizes that ‘the present is always under the past’ and what is considered ‘dead’ always haunts the present in some way (Derrida, 1994). A postcolonial theory that meshes well with this idea, as it seeks to decenter and disrupt the linearity of historical narratives and

forces the idea of coloniality to remain present. Postcolonial hauntologies respond to the claim of national coherence and linearity and, alongside progress, bring to the forefront what Avery Gordon (2008) calls ‘ghostly matters’ of social life, which are structural forms of oppression and violence that are invisible (Gordon, 2008). (Derrida, 1994 ; Gordon, 2008).

1.2 Disruption of the Supremacy of History

One of the most important elements of hauntology with respect to postcolonial criticism is the disruption of the supremacy of history and narrative. In postcolonial literature, it is primarily spectral figures, such as ‘ghosts,’ ‘revenants,’ or ‘disembodied and suppressed voices,’ that trouble and haunt the text as a way of resisting the historical narrative that is dominant. According to Peeren and Blanco (2010), such figures and their ghostly nature defy dominant control by “challenging hegemonic knowledge systems and making visible that which was never meant to be seen” (Peeren and Blanco, 2010, p.7). In Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), which narrates the story of postcolonial India, the fragmented and slave-master structure of the narrative mirrors the country’s fractured history. Another example is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), where the haunting daughter Sethe, who is a character, is a trauma, and the violent history of America. Spectral narratives, as noted by Banerjee (2022), arise from the “residues of partition, civil wars, and genocidal politics” as a means of mourning, both publicly and politically, in spaces where such acknowledgment is officially suppressed (pp. 284-297). Postcolonial hauntology disregards the conventional, chronological, and linear succession of time. The ghostly traces of colonialism, along with civil strife, clash with Enlightenment ideals of progressive, linear time and development. In such situations, the ghost signifies a critique of the closure history imposes, positing that the trauma is continuously palimpsested, out of LaCapra’s (2014) “worked through” parameters. The ghost, in LaCapra’s (2014) “working through” trauma construct, intends to relay a haunting devoid of a reaffirming victim, to spur ethical and historical engagement that, in effect, may haunt constructively (LaCapra, 2014). (Peeren and Blanco, 2010, p.7; Banerjee, 2022, pp. 284-297; LaCapra, 2014). In postcolonial literature, hauntology does not solely reflect on loss it moves to include the potential of what justice may entail. Derrida (1994) articulates what a specter of loss and mourning may entail. It is “a figure of loss, but a promise of a future yet to come, a demand for radical rethinking of justice beyond existing institutional frameworks” (Derrida, 1994, p. 36).

This is to say that in some postcolonial fiction, the dead return not only to accuse but to reimagine what other forms of being and accountability may exist. This is exemplified in the most striking way in Karunatilaka’s *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022), where the ghost of the protagonist not only contests the violence of the Sri Lankan civil war but also the indifference and moral fog that allowed such violence to endure and persist. Looking at postcolonial literature through the prism of hauntology allows for the investigation of moral guilt, historical injury, social violence, and collective amnesia. It recognizes the phantom traces of the empire and the repressed return of what official histories aim to forget. From this perspective, postcolonial hauntology attempts an understanding of postcolonial discourse, while, in a broader political sense, revealing the truth, the denial of justice, and the unacknowledged accounts of the unheard. (Derrida, 1994, p. 36).

The ghost as a literary device works well to capture a moral witnessing, silence, and complicity. Because, as Avery Gordon (2008) states, haunting is, and is quoted, “to be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects” (Gordon, 2008, p. 16). “Specters” in fictional works of trauma, genocide, and political oppression represent the enduring presence of those lives that hegemonic power structures systematically erase. These works call for an active remembrance and moral accountability in the face of oppression. Such texts foreground what is called “spectral responsibility. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Shehan Karunatilaka (2022) narrates a tale intricately entangled within a complex weave of memory, identity, and history. Memory, history, and identity, and their interplay form a core thematic cycle within

the novel, as it critiques the psychological and political injuries associated with the civil wars, state violence, and oppressive conflicts of Sri Lanka. The three, through a hauntological approach, undermine and render the three as spectral. This paradox of identity extends beyond the lived experience to encompass the unacknowledged, the denied, and the silenced. Reckoning with the mystery of his death, Maali must grapple with the memories concealed by cloisters of trauma, fear, and denial. The novel illustrates memory as restless, unreliable, and haunted. The shattered and spectral memories that haunt Maali do not coalesce to enhance his memories of the past, but rather dismantle them. As Derrida notes, the haunting “is not fixed; it remains disjointed and spectral, always resisting full recovery” (Gordon, 2008, p. 16; Derrida, 1994, p. 20).

Karunatilaka’s novel illustrates the political dimension of haunting through Maali Almeida’s spectral odyssey. Maali’s ghost is a photojournalist dedicated to revealing the truth about the war crimes, political murders, and corruption, and haunting the perpetrators. Maali’s ghost bypasses the ethereal accounts of the Sri Lankan civil war and counters the ghost of the Sri Lankan civil war. As Mbembe (2003) notes, “reclaiming the dead” is post-colonial resistance, and political actors (p. 21), those lives were lost to the burden of power, and the deaths were sacred. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Maali’s ghost reclaims a narrative, and through the ghost, the narrative reclaimed serves as a conduit to the countless histories silenced. Usually, ghosts in post-colonial literature do not collapse and dismantle linear time, as is characteristic of the empire and nationalist historiography. As Peeren (2014) states, “The spectral is politically potent because it persists. It insists on unresolved histories and contested memories” (p. 99). The postcolonial ghost questions rigid frameworks of identity, particularly those constructed through hegemonic processes. Maali is a layered identity, a queer dissident, an atheist, and a political rebel all at once. His ghostly form allows Karunatilaka to examine the violent and often unacknowledged identities of the persecuted. By allowing such a figure to ‘die’ and be vocalized, the narrative challenges defiant frameworks. This form of silent defiance is what Gordon (2008) describes as the “ghost’s power to disturb what passes for common sense” (Gordon, 2008, p. 16) by shifting the focal point on the ghost and on the act of remembering.

Ultimately, the postcolonial ghost embodies resistance in the form of a disruptive ethos of remembrance. Maali’s duty in the novel is not one of revenge, but of truth, exposure, and discomfort. His ghostly task aligns with Avery Gordon’s (2008) definition of haunting as “a constituent element of modern social life” (p. 7), which has unfinished work of justice. This form of resistance is spectral, slow, and ethical, as it invites the living to confront their actions and the weight of their past. (Mbembe, 2003, p. 21; Peeren, 2014, p. 99; Gordon, 2008, p. 16; Gordon, 2008, p. 7). This study demonstrates how engaging with *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* bridges the current debates in the literary, political, and philosophical terrains. It shows how fictional works offer spectral possibilities of justice, memory, and collective confrontation. Focusing on the fiction, these works have, to some extent, fictionalized the contemporary realities and socio-political contexts, helping to think about and express socially elusive memories and justice, and aiding in societal confrontation. The suggested literature addresses the intertwining relationships of spectrality, political violence and postcolonial memory as articulated in contemporary fiction through the lens of Derrida's hauntology. The theoretical works of Derrida on the spectral as the ethical, the disruption of the present (Derrida, 1994), Gordon’s haunting as a sociopolitical construct (Gordon, 2008) and Peeren’s spectral metaphor in cultural critique (Peeren, 2014) should strengthen the interpretation of Karunatilaka’s ghostly protagonist as a witness and resistor to systemic historical amnesia. Although some article considers the novel’s themes, the hauntological features of its narrative structure and politics are still unexplored.

3. Methodology

This methodology hinges on the meeting point of spectral politics and hauntology. Derrida’s hauntology, first

introduced in *Specters of Marx* (1994), engages with issues of presence, time, and justice by arguing that the past is never fully extinguished; it returns as ghostly reminders seeking acknowledgment. Such a conceptual framework is especially relevant to Karunatilaka's

novel, in which the dead protest against the official histories of the state, compelling the living to remember their ethical duties. By invoking hauntology, the methodology appreciates how spectral entities undermine sovereign histories, performing what Derrida (1994) describes as the "responsibility to the ghost." This study, however, suggests a literary-philosophical approach is the most suitable way to examine the engagement with death, memory, and justice in the novel. The literary component allows for the focus on the form, narrative voice, and other symbolic motifs while the philosophical component, in this case, hauntology, offers discourse to interrogate the ontological and epistemological issues of presence, absence, and time. The political engagement encapsulated in the aforementioned allows the novel to maintain an association with the broader landscape of postcolonial Sri Lanka. In this context, the ghosts may be interpreted as manifestations of unfinished mourning, muted history, and subaltern struggle.

Therefore, in addition to the textual rationale, the approach is defended on ethical and political grounds, as it endeavours to articulate the silenced haunting histories.

Qualitative methods are considered appropriate for working on cultural texts. In interpretive literary studies, the methods emphasize the construction and deconstruction of meaning through language, temporality, and narrative structures (Culler, 2011). Here, the approach is textual with an emphasis on close reading, which enables the reader to discern the intricacies of Karunatilaka's narrative technique, particularly his manipulation of temporality, the tension between silence and speech, and the spectral inscription of the text (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018 ; Culler, 2011). Karunatilaka's novel is predominantly structured around the gaps in the narratives of the disappeared, the fragmented temporality of the afterlife, and the unfinished mourning that permeates the victims of the war. Only a sustained attention to the silence of the text allows one to surface the spectral traces that remain unarticulated. Spectral politics in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* demonstrates the afterlives of colonial rule and the necropolitical governance of contemporary Sri Lanka. Derridean hauntology, along with the extra perspectives offered, suggests that the unsettling of texts is not merely literary but also engages the political and the ethical. This approach enables the study to balance the philosophical and the historical material realities of post-conflict Sri Lanka.

4. Analysis

S. Karunatilaka introduces the protagonist Maali through the paradox of being 'dead' and 'alive' with a privilege of being subaltern. The protagonist is introduced as dying every day, waking as though dead and confined within the walls of an institution. Still, Maali is an active agent of the 'undead'. Like a celebrant of a marginalized, ungrievable, 'nonhuman' cow, 'hauntology' describes Derrida's spectral visibility, as 'a specter' of a prisoner whose 'spectral' 'ungrievable' witness remains 'alive' within the temporal borders of the living's agency. Maali's afterlife is a persistent seeing, 'active' accusation. The hauntology passes through the life and time of a 'before-dead' witnessing and dying of ethics in the rubble of life. As a war photographer, Maali was a witness to the 'ungrievable' dead, a living file of documented evidence. His after-death 'agency' is the result of dying with a 'graph' that still desperately calls out for justice. To ensure his ungrievable justice, he captures the photographs to deny the dead after the living 'un grievable' dead. Two formal features of Karunatilaka's presentation support this liminality.

First, the narrative collapses registers of knowledge. The dead Maali has knowledge bestowed upon him in his state of deadness that he lacked in life (he watches the social machines that made the violence), is still speechless, and has no physical agency, illustrating that 'Ghosts can't talk to people or their voices are being ignored, making them invisible. Second, the novel crashes time by placing its "seven moons",

which makes his in-between state pressing and urgent: there is a deadline to the ethical work he needs to complete. The novel's message is clear: forgetting is violent. In a world made spectral by Karunatilaka, the state may choose to progress to a state of amnesia, but there are consequences: a social body, a cityscape, and a body of unresolved, unburied testimonies. In terms of narrative, the motif "after seven moons the souls are to be forgotten" is explicit. When the institutional memory wins, the ghosts are quieted, and injustice is allowed to stand unchallenged. By presenting the continuing cycles of denial and violence, the novel makes the haunting politically active, a weapon against encouraged forgetting. Without trying to catalogue every instance, several representative scenes crystallize how haunting an intervention is.

Absurd Bureaucracy in the Afterlife Karunatilaka's use of satire depicts the afterlife as a bureaucratic tax office, for instance, how the afterlife as a bureaucratic satire works, and how the absurdism of dehumanization becomes an administrative rationality in itself. 'The afterlife is a tax office, and everyone wants their rebate. This absurdism turns the afterlife into a parody of state machinery, making clear that power relations extend into symbolic orders in these states' bureaucratic relations, ghosts' subversive laughter as a claim agency mocks these systems. These scenes show haunting as a form of protest that must bear the cost of moral compromise and cannot be fully silenced by official measures. Aesthetic detail in the novel (photographic description, bureaucratic parody, bodily symptoms of memory, and so forth) is a medium through which spectral testimony becomes politically assertive. The state wants closure on political time. Like when the powers that be say: "The war's over," "we're rebuilding," "move on," or "stop looking back." Karunatilaka suggests that the past is everywhere. The seven moons, and the bodily memories that say, "I'll be back endlessly." The memories that say "I'll be back" conquer closure. The novel states that the memories that say "I'll be back" the most have not been paid for. Maali's time, as described in the novel, is off. That's the form of political time. Maali is the time that counters the states.

4.2 The Afterlife as an Extension of Sovereign Power: A Sovereign Mirror

Analyzing the afterlife as an extension of the logic of sovereignty becomes robust with the use of Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics. Mbembe argues that sovereign power is exercised when one decides which lives to sustain and which ones to forgo (Mbembe, 2003). Karunatilaka illustrates how contemporary political power starkly demonstrates this right not just at the moment of killing but in the administration of death (death management) that flows downstream: silence inflicted on the narratives of the dead, the erasure of the dead from the public sphere, and mourning that is selective and public. A bureaucratic afterlife order exercises that power in authority's post-mortem form, a form of authority that in life is bureaucratic: some dead are visible, amplified, and remembered; others are classified, relegated, and allowed to sink into absence. In Maali's world, the state's necropolitical decisions persist beyond death as the institutions (and the public's everyday practices) determine which deaths are worthy of the labour of mourning. So, the absurdity of the afterlife's bureaucracy is not just a joke. It's also a metaphor for structural violence. Those dead in life get no justice in death. This is the political thrust of the novel: killing does not end the political process, for the dead may still be counted, counted out, registered, or erased. The bureaucratic afterlife shows the deadening effects of power in producing and maintaining historical silence. Returning to the influence, evidence and constraints of Maali's posthumous journey. Maali's ghostly itinerary and his posthumous attempts to influence the living are the political actions of this narrative. Maali, as a war photographer, was a witness in life, and in death, he still is a witness who must find the right ways to have his testimony matter. Maali's hidden photographs of the injustices and atrocities he captured, which still validate the official narratives, are the central elements of the story. To have these photographs seen is to have them acknowledged, and this is the essence of his mission. Karunatilaka gets this right. "You have had more homophobic abuse in the afterlife than you had in twenty years of playing with boys". This feels uncomfortably accurate. Social stigmas immediately attach and

are violently enforced in all parts of a life. This point reveals a paradox of the afterlife. We assume the afterlife scatters all the structures that wounded the subject in life. This indicates that struggles for political dignity and recognition do not cease in the afterlife.

This brings us to the phrase, “Even the afterlife is designed to keep the masses stupid”. You are ideologically controlled from the cradle to the grave. This control shapes what knowledge is to be had and what moral worth is to be had, and that knowledge you are offered is little. This survival of the absurd serves to disinform you in life and even in death. Karunatilaka wants us to

understand that the political order rests on the culture of injustice. Policy change is only theatre. Gayatri Spivak asks, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, pointing to the ways the powerful block and distort the voice of those on the margins. Karunatilaka answers Spivak indirectly: yes, the subaltern can speak, but only in ways the powerful do not understand, simple testimony. In *The Seven Moons*, the subaltern’s mode of return is spectral. Those who the state and the public institutions collapsed invisibly (the disappeared, the politically murdered, and stigmatized minorities) return not as recognized citizens, but ghosts, and their narratives circulate through channels that communicatively and legally respond to the challenges.

The spectral modality makes two interconnected moves. The subaltern is reinscribed into the social memory. The dead are counted, named, and remembered. The line, “Thirty ghosts stand behind everyone alive, the ratio by which the dead outnumber the living,” dramatizes the extent of suppressed lives, demanding attention to a social reality of a memory-debt so large that it is suffocating. The former is recalled through spectral speech, which bypasses the systems that quieted the subaltern during their lifetime. The dead are not subject to the same control as the living, disappearing. Their return is a form of testimony that opposes the state legitimizing frameworks and instead calls for ethical recognition. It might seem like Karunatilaka tries to illustrate a paradox when he says, “Ghosts can’t talk to people”. At first, this seems to suggest that people cannot talk to ghosts, but if you dive deeper into the politics of the novel, it actually underscores a specific paradox: the ghosts whose voices are not heard or represented in the dominant forms of the media, the courts, and public history. The ghosts of the novel find other expressive forms. They haunt people and spaces, leave traces in the archives, manifest as bodily symptoms (memories that cough or ache), and testify in objects like photographs. The subaltern’s conflicting presence and absence, as voiced by Karunatilaka, there’s the insistence of needing a voice, yet lacking the absence of a voice through a structured approach. These narratives require the living to adopt a different listening. To read photographs as testimony, to feel the weight of the presence of the ordinary, and to pay attention to the ‘Hosts are invisible to those with breath, invisible like guilt or gravity or electricity or thoughts’. Inescapable jail metaphors reveal the reality: invisibility and nonexistence are distinct. To claim justice, one’s suppressed existence begs recognition, injustice seeks claim and attention.

4.3 Maali as Subaltern: Marginality, Queerness, and Witness Function

In the case of the Queer and liminal, Maali is an unforgiving subaltern. As a photojournalist, having a career that allows him to see and document reality, he witnesses the isolated and the invisible due to informal employment, lapsed cultural acceptance of his queerness, and the sociopolitical threat that deeply marginalizes him and his life. “You have had more homophobic abuse in the afterlife than you had in twenty years of playing with boys”. This haunting line means Maali lost his queerness in ‘death’, perpetuating the marginalization. Maali’s double subalternity- having social fragility in life and in death, the structures imposed to silence him and his testimony still thrive. Even though Maali is no longer with us, his eyewitness account and his photographs serve as testimony to the violence that the Maali’s posthumous testimony is radical official narratives leave out. Maali’s observations from the afterlife name the perpetrators as well as the mechanisms of erasure. The novel presents Maali’s subaltern voice as both ethical demand and political weapon, as the returns of the dead serve as a counter-archive that refuses erasure. In contrast to conventional archives and histories, where official narratives and testimonies drive

the record and take prominence, the novel's spectral chorus serves as a radical archive. In practical terms, this resembles a textual logic where the ghosts keep memory alive. The spectral chorus serves to collapse the divisive hierarchy that is all too common in testimony, archives, and narratives. The chorus of voices and apparitions serves to progressively tighten the logic and challenge the hierarchy that some deaths are sayable, and some are not. Haunting and survival strategy become one in Karunatilaka. The living may silence the witnesses, but the dead refuse: witness intimidation, disappearance, and the legal system. The dead keep their claims alive in the official silence of memory. Refusal manifests as a spectral presence, and the afterlife is a political stage. All subaltern claims make their demands hauntingly clear until the living take on the difficult and thankless task of bearing witness.

To speak, the subaltern must haunt, because for the subaltern, haunting is the only forum left open. Maali's narration in the novel is a moral exorcism. The oscillation between wit, irony, and moral urgency creates a narrative voice that disturbs and delights. The absurd and the grotesque coexist so that comedy and horror cohere in a single ethical gesture. The ghosts that haunt Maali's narration are the forces of suppressed memory, which haunting attempts to expel. To narrate, to name, to show, is to tell. The form of the book itself is a moral exorcism, and opacity is hauntingly resisted. The ghosts of the narrative performance and archive refuse to be forgotten. Photography constitutes one of the crucial forms of testimony, serving the function of the performing part of the ethics of storytelling. Images, unlike spoken words, acquire a permanence that is challenging to refute once they begin to circulate. Maali's hidden cache (snapshots stored clandestinely beneath domestic thresholds) becomes the book's sacred counter-archive: the images serve as moral relics that are to be disseminated to stimulate recognition. The ethics of preservation carefully concealing photographs or performing small gestures of preservation knot a soft anchor of truth, a material and durable testament that outlives institutional disregard, the neglect of which is routinized and bureaucratic. The ethics, therefore, reside in a dual demand. The first is to produce images (or testimonies) that are earnest as well as hard to disregard, and the second is to ensure that they reach a willing audience. Maali's frustration that a photograph might be seen and not acted upon, or that living ones look and then look away, becomes the drama of the moral tension of the narrative. The novel argues that testimony lacking reception in or recognition by a community, and the recognition of an institution, is, on the ethical register, grossly inadequate. Avery Gordon's sociological perspective on the haunting phenomenon clarifies why Maali's spectral narration is not understood as simply melancholic repetition and must be characterized as a desire for transformation. Gordon (2008) suggests that haunting reveals the social order that sustains inequities and requires them to be reworked. In Karunatilaka's text, the ghostly storytelling phenomenon performs this very intervention: it makes the reader understand that the lack of institutional attention is not an accident but a structural reality that requires attention. Maali's narration is, thus, not an act of private consolation; it is a public effort aimed at the transformation of the system of collective memory, the institutional psyche, and the social conscience.

4.4 Postcolonial Memory Politics and Institutional Sanitization

Sri Lanka's recent history, its communal unrest, the disappearances, and contested narratives provide the backdrop of the novel. Scholars like Rameez (2019) note that official discourses and succeeding political regimes tend to sanitize or marginalize the suffering of the minorities, resulting in public commemoration that is fragmented and contested.

Karunatilaka intervenes in this politically charged context by employing spectral return as an act of restoration. Where official histories are silent or politically selective, the ghosts are able to offer alternatives, and where state archives are, in effect, incomplete, private photographic records provide corroboration. When Karunatilaka's ghosts appear, they do not simply haunt for sentiment; they reforge connections between the past and the present. Attempts to obscure records and silence witnesses are aimed at producing collective amnesia. Phantom testimonies interrupt this amnesia by demanding names,

images, and stories. The dead who “stand behind everyone alive” capture this insistence that refuses to fade—the moral echo. The larger project of retrieving suppressed and hidden histories is in Maali's attempt to have and see his photographs. Karunatilaka's novel exemplifies a work of fiction that remains a tool of remembrance. The blending of ghost narrative, photographic imagery, and the irony of bureaucracy reanimates the histories that have been buried in a form that is both affective and evidentiary. The unique power of fiction is the ability to piece together fragmented traces and voices into a coherent testimony, images, names, familial grief, and institutional apparent unwillingness. The novel dramatizes the transition of private memory into the public record, the narrative structures, photographs, and the moral claim of the audience and the memory to respond (Rameez, 2019).

Karunatilaka's novel embodies a moral reflection on a specific historical moment: the civil unrest and the political repression that transpired in contemporary Sri Lanka. The book's spectral cast of ghosts of the disappeared, journalists, and civilians transforms historical silences into presences that demand attention. The novel's personification of loss in haunting figures transforms faceless statistics into moral reminders that inhabit the consciousness. The lines, “We fear the army more than we fear them” and “Do not be afraid of demons; it is the living we should fear,” emphasize that the real fear, more than the supernatural, is the socially accepted structures of power and control that hide, shame, and deny. The spectral quality of language in the novel reframes the social realities of censorship, propaganda, and the erasure of dissenters, compelling the reader to acknowledge the moral weight of indifference. Thus, fiction accomplishes that which history records without permission: the presence of the silenced and the dignity that is owed to them. Karunatilaka employs a mixture of documentary realism (with photographic detail and the depiction of locations and bureaucracy) and the supernatural (the ghostly narration in the *In Between*). This mixture allows the narrative to occupy two registers at once: the empirical record and the emotional. Historical accounts may mention figures and institutional failures, while ghostly narration captures the ache of absence and loss. Bodily metaphors, “Memory comes to you in bodily ailments... memory arrives in the form of cough,” are evocative of the trauma embedded in the mind and the body. The emotional truth conveyed in the novel is powerful: the experience of living with unfinished histories. Karunatilaka turns ethical parables into public crises (assassinations, censorship, and disappearances), provoking civic reflection and evading forensic documentation.

One of the ethical accomplishments of the novel is the insistence that the personal and political dimensions of existence be considered together. In conjunction with broader social structures, Maali's life, his relationships, desires and social marginalization are impacted by the abuse, homophobic “You have had more homophobic abuse in the afterlife than you had in twenty years of playing with boys”. In the *In-Between*, as Maali recalls the intimate memories, the text's insistence that private pain is determined by, and mirrors, public conditions is a powerful articulation of the idea that personal wounds and collective injuries are always intertwined. The ethical strength of this intertwining is that it refuses the division of treating civil unrest as “macro” and private sorrow as “micro” or “microcosm.” Maali's haunting mediates the idea that a person's distress is the product of a nation's unrest, while personal losses, in the aggregate, contribute to the shared suffering of the nation.

A hauntopolitical understanding considers spectrality as a ghost politics. The ghosts become ethical agents on the chasm of politics. Within the ghost accounts, as written by Karunatilaka, the ghost is a witness, archivist, and accuser, sustaining, carrying, and challenging the memory of systems built on silence. This is haunting as politics. Maali's spectral being and his liminal stay on seasonal intervals amount to the past urgent and politicized remembrance. “Ghosts can't talk to people” and “Thirty ghosts stand behind everyone alive” starkly illustrate a communicative chasm and moral suffocation of the present by unresolved remembrances. The answer to Karunatilaka's question of testimony is hauntology as civic engagement, photographs, narratives, and the ghost of memory, active and politically sustained. Within this hauntopolitical frame, the ghost is confronted with haunting and interconnected multiplicity: The recognition of the haunting, memory,

and ghost sever a summons. The call is a haunting of the living. Responsibility to the ghost (Derrida 1994) seeks recognition and testimony-witness bearing outside the Institution.

Karunatilaka extends political critique to the afterlife itself. “The afterlife is a tax office, and everyone wants their rebate” conveys the afterlife as an allegory of bureaucratic control. Achille Mbembe’s argument that sovereignty defines who may live and who must be forgotten is countered: power also dictates who is remembered and whose evidence circulates (Mbembe, 2003). Karunatilaka’s afterlife reproduces these hierarchies. Maali’s haunting to have the photographs seen and truths acknowledged reflects on the systemic neglect that extends symbolically into the world of the dead. The prejudice and bureaucracy depicted in Maali’s afterlife suggest they endure even beyond mortal existence. The act of witnessing constitutes the primary ethical dimension of the novel. Witnessing, as *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* shows, is not merely passive seeing, but an act of active remembrance, requiring both courage and engagement. The living may choose to ignore, suppress, or witness, but only the last option is a step toward justice. The statement, “Do not be afraid of demons; it is the living we should fear,” shifts the burden of fear toward moral responsibility. The foremost instrument of testimony is photography. Photographs are the means through which the ghosts of the dead speak, but the living must transform the images into acknowledgment and, ultimately, into change. The responsibility of testimony, spectral or photographic, is inescapable, and the novel’s structure and the testimony it declares impose it equally on the collective and the individual.

While some periods of history may not appear to be traumatic at first, the lack of closure eventually echoes back, becoming a haunting presence that needs to be reconciled. Maali’s moons remind us that unresolved issues of justice do not simply fade with time—testimony (spectral and photographic). Testimony is again a difficult process. “Ghosts can’t talk to people,” suggests that it is needed to find a way to speak of the unspeakable. Testimony shows the profound consequences of the unsaid through images, through the language of the body, and through the silence of the community. The dead who are marginalized still speak and testify through the leftover signs of culture-corporeality (somatic memory) (Mbembe, 2003). The phrase, “sneezes, aches, scratches, and itches,” suggests the haunting is corporeal and is felt in the body. The presence of a ghost is a testimony to the past. The deep and unsaid memories we carry with us in our bodies make a personal testimony. Combined, these claims articulate a hauntopolitical vision: haunting is a political technology that (a) reveals the incompleteness of the official accounts; (b) mobilizes testimony that is outside the purview of institutions; and (c) transforms a dead past into a lever of accountability. Derrida provides the ontology of the problem (the ghost as a trace and ethical summons), and Mbembe supplies the political dimension (the sovereign’s power over life and death, and over forgetting). Gordon provides the social framework (how haunting manifests and demands the change of structural oppression). Karunatilaka’s novel brings together these registers in a literary form: the ghost is a subject that remembers and compels the living to respond. The preceding analysis has demonstrated that, when it comes to postcolonial fiction, far more can be illuminated when one performs a close reading that takes into account time, rhetoric, and material metaphor (photograph, body, desk, and queue). Deconstruction (excavating aporias, absences, and undecidables) is used to pinpoint the precise locations where the text subverts official state narratives. Ethically, the work remains aligned to Derrida’s “responsibility to the ghost”: that the critic does not colonize spectral voices with closure, but listens, making visible the architectures that rendered the voices spectral, and demands institutional action that converts testimony to action. The coming chapter seeks to build on this work by exploring the implications of hauntopolitics on postcolonial literature and communal reconciliation. It considers: in what ways are civic practices of memorialization built from literary practices? What institutional arrangements (archives, truth commissions, and media freedom) are suggested by a hauntopolitical approach? In what ways does the comparative literature of other South Asian ghost narratives or global post-conflict literature complicate or enrich the approach developed here? In the final chapter, it is

outlined what the cultural and political agents might do in response to the ethical call of the novel. It illustrates the findings from the analysis of the hauntpolitical oeuvre of Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. The scope of the novel transcends the limits of a post-civil war Sri Lankan ghost narrative. It takes a bold theoretical and narrative stance while employing the ghostly to combat official amnesia, transform the justice timeline, and amplify the subaltern voice. Combining Jacques Derrida's hauntology with Cathy Caruth's trauma and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, Karunatilaka simultaneously engages a politically pressing and philosophically complex literary mode of inquiry.

The article's objective is to discuss how spectral and ghostly elements exemplify the hauntology of Jacques Derrida, where hauntology destabilizes linear claims of temporal and postcolonial states. Karunatilaka does not use ghosts simply as supernatural features; rather, they serve as epistemic and ethical limit case agents of a given situation who detect the insufficiency of official historiography, the lingering unsolved violence, and the post conflict imagination of Sri Lanka. Derrida's hauntology advocates that the present is always haunted by the absence of the past that is unfinished and is calling for recognition, or, as he terms it, 'unresolved returning traces.' This logic is pervasive in the novel's spectral architecture. Maali Almeida's narration from beyond the grave places the reader in what can be envisioned as a non-linear temporal void.

Within the novel's afterlife, there are no rules of causation or logic, only what Derrida refers to as a 'time out of joint' characterized by suspended deadlines. Events of the same atrocities of the civil war, political killings, journalistic malfeasance, and complicity are interwoven and erode the State's narrative of history as a closed loop.

Another objective of the study is to discuss that the main mechanisms of hauntology at work are wounded time and unresolved mourning, and they disrupt the coherence of the memory of the postcolonial state. Rather than framing history as a linear journey from conflict to reconciliation, Karunatilaka builds a narrative universe where time is broken, repetitively cycles, and is ethically ambiguous. This dislocation of time is a reflection of what Derrida calls hauntology, a condition where the past is never truly gone, but continues to return and vex the present. In the context of post-war Sri Lanka, such wounded time demonstrates the falsity of state-sponsored descriptions that claim the violence is over and that national unity has been achieved. The very structure of the novel manifests wounded time. The presence of Maali Almeida in the afterlife is dominated by the arbitrary time of the "seven moons," an interval that is suspended and does not conform to the demands of a sequence. Within this spectral time-frame, past atrocities, present silences, and unrealized futures co-exist and collapse the distinctions between life and death, memory and forgetting. This time, in which the main character experiences the afterlife, can be understood as representing the temporal state of the postcolonial state. This serves as a critique of the postcolonial state's reliance upon the illusion of a historical closure by stating that the time of violence is not closed, and that it is far more advanced than the present time. Rather, the traumas of the civil war are present as unresolved and unfinished.

Another objective addresses the novel's assessment of the afterlife and ghostly subjectivity as a form of subaltern defiance. Here, the afterlife is not an escape from power; it is a chilling extension of power. In this assessment, ghostly subjectivity is a central site of resistance for the political dead and the erased from official histories. *Bureaucratic Afterlives and the Continuity of Power*: One of the most clever and satirical accomplishments of the novel is to represent the "In- Between" as a bizarre and nonsensical bureaucracy, a "tax office" of sorts, where souls are lined up, and "everyone wants their rebate." This is, of course, absurdist humor, but it is a critique of what Achille Mbembe refers to as necropolitics: sovereign power over who lives and dies and who gets to be remembered or forgotten (Mbembe, 2003). Karunatilaka extends this logic to argue that sovereign power even extends to the administration of death. The afterlife, with its bureaucracy of forms, queues, and petty officials, is a stark reflection of the state's dehumanizing bureaucratic machinery. It is a commentary that the hierarchies, prejudices, and indifference of the world of the living are, if anything,

amplified in the afterlife. This is chillingly confirmed by the line, “You have had more homophobic abuse in the afterlife than you had in twenty years of playing with boys.” This, of course, reveals that social stigmas and violence are not merely mortal frailties but are embedded in the very structures of power that transcend death. (Mbembe, 2003).

4.5 Spectral Subjectivity as Subaltern Agency

The novel, within this framework, constitutes a powerful, if indirect, response to Gayatri Spivak's “Can the Subaltern Speak?” question. Karunatilaka seems to answer in the affirmative, suggesting that the subaltern does speak, albeit in ghostly, spectral ways that circumvent the walls erected to silence them. The silence of spectrality and subalternity does not eliminate Maali's marginalization. Instead, it highlights the horrifying persistence of her ghostly existence and, paradoxically, this spectrality provides her with a new, tactical form of agency. Released from the corporeal vulnerability of his body, he becomes an “epistemic agent” in his purest form, an eye that floats, witnessing in a police station, a media office, or a torture chamber, the hidden workings of power without fear of reprisal. Posting hidden photographs is the ultimate act of defiance if the photographs remain truly hidden. “Hidden under the bed” implies that the photographs were meant to be discreet and forgotten. Reserve items are of importance that the state cannot control. The act of invisibility is posthumous; it is a lawful testimony that the state cannot contest. The specter highlighted and made alive the ethics of the testimony. Would the audience witness the evidence of the dead and the testimony of the living be there to testify? The novel invokes haunting not as a curse but as a method of survival, living to testify their evidence, and testimony “mad, crazy, and alive” to survive. The truly erased survive to attest to their forgotten refusal and disobedience. The novel reclaims the erased. Lastly, an outline of the major themes constructed in the analysis presents a unified and hauntopolitical vision. The novel becomes a literary testament of Karunatilaka. The haunting political project of the novel unfolds along four interconnected pathways: The Ontological Politics of Haunting: It challenges the boundaries of life and death, as well as past and present. The unresolved past is not somewhere behind us. It is potent, active, and politically vital in the present. The ghost is the representative of this unresolved past.

5. Findings and Conclusion

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida uses spectrality not just as a decorative narrative feature, but also as a fully-fledged postcolonial technique where articulated, repressed histories, ethical culpability, and political responsibility converge. Relying on Derrida's hauntology and postcolonial critique to examine Karunatilaka's novel, the article portrayed ghosts, haunting, and the afterlife as instrumental in examining the unaddressed specters of Sri Lanka and the country's post-conflict national memory crisis. The analysis has captured the spectral and ghostly elements of the novel, exemplifying Derrida's hauntological principles. Although Maali Almeida is a ghost, she is not the all-too-familiar specter of Derrida. Unlike his ghosts, who arrive from the past, Maali Almeida occupies the future. Her ghostly being is liminal. She is a specter. Derrida's specter, Maali Almeida, is the embodiment of the liminality of being, time, and history. She brings the ethical, unaddressed, and unmourned into the present. She is the rematerialization of the unaddressed and unrealized. Given the postcolonial condition of censorship and selective amnesia, haunting becomes the corrective historiography of the absent and silenced. The seven moons symbolize the fractured structure of time and the Ontology of delay, repetition, and return. It focuses on the past's haunting within the present, the unfinished and unsettled memories of the nation, and the construction and fragmentation of a national memory, which, when present, reflects the past. In the novel, the unfinished process of mourning is a communal one that remains so because of the unprocessed histories of the dead that have been ignored. The article has shown that Karunatilaka, through the reconfiguration of ghostly subjectivity, transforms the afterlife into a site of subaltern resistance. The

dead are not merely victims of historical obliteration in the novel; they are narrators and moral agents of history. The novel empowers the dead to reclaim their agency, and in so doing, it dislodges the politics of silence and the culture of subservience, calling for the imaginary and the cosmo-vision of justice to listen to the marginalized voices of the dead, the victims of the injustice of history. In this way, the afterlife becomes a marginalized counter-space where the unutterable becomes the unspeakable and the ungoverned. To sum up, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* provides an ethical manuscript of literature as a hauntopolitical imaginative archive of the postcolonial condition. It illustrates that a reconciliation that disregards the memory of the past is an insufficient compromise, and that the awaited future stays constrained by the unanswered claims of the past. Karunatilaka forces readers to "live with ghosts"-to acknowledge haunting as an essential engagement with moral culpability, historical responsibility, and social healing in postcolonial societies—through its spectral imagination.

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