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Ghosts, Eco-Queer, Sri Lankan History: Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

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Abstract

This essay aims to comment on the consequences of the queering of historical vision in reference to the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict and, in a wider perspective, of the country's origins in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022). The tropicality of the writer's outlook is analysed in terms of the shift from individualized focus on tragic events to an ecocentric vision of the unity of all beings. The novel, featuring a gay photographer, contains multiple references to the iconic photographic work of Nick Ut ("Napalm Girl") and, crucially, Sri Lankan photographer Lionel Wendt. Inscribed in a reinvented Buddhist/Saivite worldview, the text blurs the painful perception of the recent past and presents the interethnic conflict as part of the general, ever-repeating mechanism of violence activated at the country's beginnings by the legendary primordial queen Kuveni, as told in the *Mahāvaṁsa*. Due to the transhistorical aspect of violence under the auspices of Kuveni-Mahakali, the mission of the photographer, who tries to solve the political conundrum through artistic intervention, cannot be accomplished. Instead, the novel's focus moves to an even broader, ecocentric vision that acquires a queer resonance. The range of queer relations expands beyond the intimate relations of the protagonist to become an intimate connection to all living beings. In parallel, the 'decloseted' historical vision shifts away from the recent genocide and broadens into a tropical eco-queer outlook encompassing human and non-human vitality.

Keywords: Shehan Karunatilaka, Sri Lankan literature, Buddhist/Saivite, tropicality, queer ecocriticism, tropical eco-queer, queer eco-Gothic

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Introduction: Closets, Boxes, Pictures

In 2012, Jaya Jacobo defined the *homo tropicus* as an "epiphany in time" (p. 67). One of the keys to comprehending the specificity of the tropical way of thinking, as distinct from one that is peculiar to temperate climates, is the value of co-presence in time that comes to the fore in detriment of historical subjectivity. Instead of accentuating the position of the individual as an independent *agens* and *patiens* of a particular history, in which events are seen as exceptional, particularly tragic, and suffering no comparison with other times and events, the *homo tropicus* apprehends the immersion of all beings in the temporal flux, impressing the non-specificity of all events and therefore the universality of suffering. According to this perspective, no individual can claim the right to a destiny that is tragic in the sense of classical European tragedy: individualised, associated with a hero isolated from the community, appealing for compassion precisely because his or her fate is unique and exceptional, deeply alien to the common lives of the spectators. To a temperate mind, such an inscription of victims in the universality of suffering, diluting the guilt and the responsibility of the offenders, is unacceptable and revolting. Yet this worldview finds its legitimisation in the deeply rooted systems of thought formed in the tropics, such as in the legacy of Sri Lankan Buddhism and local forms of Hinduism-Saivism.

In this article, I will discuss the novel written by Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022), focusing on the tropical perception of history and the peculiar, tropical way of queering it into an ecocentric vision. Although the issue with which the writer deals—the Sri Lankan civil war and genocide—is particularly painful, the wisdom presented to the reader points at the dissolution of all beings in the flux of life rather than individual tragedy, responsibility, guilt, and punishment. The queering of the outlook goes far beyond the simple fact that the protagonist of the narration is a photographer who happens to be gay; it implies the proliferation of interrelations with other beings. The outcome of the queering device is an ecocentric vision of the unity of life. Its analysis may enrich the theoretical framework of international queer ecocriticism presented by such scholars as Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (2010). The Buddhist-Saivite background invoked by Karunatilaka forms a cultural contribution that appeals for additional analytical depth beyond the standard methodologies elaborated in the context of Western academia. On the other hand, the local imagery of the afterlife, the monstrous, and the macabre offers a new angle to postcolonial and global Gothic critique as defined by Ken Gelder (2014). The Buddhist belief in the continuity of all forms of life, and therefore in the existence of animal and even vegetable ghosts, creates a field for a peculiar tropical eco-Gothic approach.

In Karunatilaka's fiction, the metaphors of closure, such as the photographic frame, the box used to store compromising photographs, and the common figurative way of approaching the gay condition as a 'closet', are transformed into their opposite: dissolution of the frame and widening of the scope, opening the box and the revelation of its content, radical decloseting of queer existence. The latter implies not just social endorsement of gay identity but the revelation and affirmation of the profound connection to all forms of life, human and non-human. The tropicality of the literary and critical vision created by Karunatilaka deals with the ecocentric inscription of human life in the luxuriance, vitality, and impermanence of nature, rather than its isolation from other beings in an exclusively human understanding of history and historical tragedy.

The issues of tropicality as a natural and cultural background associated with queer and critical Gothic perspectives contribute to a multidimensional text that I will strive to analyse in its complexity. The interpretation of Karunatilaka's labyrinthine novel requires an insight into multiple legacies and spheres of cultural competence. After a short presentation of the writer, I speak of the transmodal relation between the text and the photographic 'pre-texts' that inspired him. I show how Karunatilaka's radically decolonial stance pierces through colonial history to the remote beginnings of Sri Lanka that should be apprehended along the lines of the local religious and philosophical worldview. In particular, this local legacy shapes the queer identity exemplified by the text's protagonist and defines his place in a society torn by interethnic conflict. Speaking of marginality and resilience, I will comment on the peculiar queer contribution to the survival of the community. Finally, the ecocentric focus will become patent in the last part of this essay, showing how the queering of Sri Lankan history leads to a profoundly vitalist vision encompassing human and non-human life.

Situating the Writer and his Text

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida, published in 2022 by the small, independent publisher Sort of Books, is the author's second novel. The original draft of the text that would eventually become *The Seven Moons*, titled *Devil Dance*, dates back to 2015, when it was shortlisted for the Gratiaen Prize (a Sri Lankan literary contest founded in 1992 by Michael Ondaatje—who was born on the island—with the money earned by his novel *The English Patient*). In 2020, the unrevised text was published on the Indian subcontinent by Hamish Hamilton, a part of Penguin Publishing House, as *Chats with the Dead*. When the text appeared in its definitive version to gain the Booker Prize in 2022, its author, Shehan Karunatilaka (born in 1975), had already dealt with Sri

Lankan history in his debut novel, *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew*, self-published in 2010.[1]

Both in the first and second novels, the events thematized date back to the dismal decade of the 1980s. In *Chinaman*, failed alcoholic sports journalist WG Karunasena takes up the quest for a disappeared cricketer, the phenomenal left-arm spinner Pradeep Mathew. Trying to elucidate the mystery of his disappearance, Karunasena moves into a web of thugs and gamblers. The evocation of the dodgy bars and suspicious districts of Colombo anticipates a great deal of the second novel's ambiance, associating queerness and a specific understanding of tropicality: the proliferation of disorderly elements, chaos, marginality, and social decay that stand apart from the temperate expectations of orderly social structure.

The way Karunatilaka deals with the memory of oppression and political uncertainty causing such situations as unexplained disappearances of people in *Chinaman*, and even more so, the genocide evoked in *The Seven Moons* justified the categorization of his novels under the label 'Human Rights Literature' proposed by Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Human Rights and Literature: Writing Rights* (2016). The analysis of the narration in the categories befitting this type of writing focuses on how the texts "express, interpret, and convert symbolic representations to narrate the history of Human Rights violations" (Sharma & Tripathi, 2023, p. 173). In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the tragic period that the novelistic photographer is supposed to document starts in 1983. It is useful for the sake of this analysis to recapitulate briefly the historical events evoked in the novel because, as Sharma and Tripathi building on Nayar's proposal explain, "metatextual information serves as a framework that supports the personal stories being narrated within the text, rather than being a mere cover-up" (Sharma & Tripathi, 2023, p. 175). Some voices, such as the writer V.V. Ganeshananthan (2023) (as well as the Pakistani scholars Aamer Shaheen, Muhammad Salman, and Sadia Qamar, 2023, p. 735), are keen to identify historical figures behind the literary personages: the novelistic Helper, Dr Ranee is Rajani Thiranagama, a professor of anatomy at the University of Jaffna, murdered in 1989 for her criticism of the separatist Tamil Tigers. Also, the protagonist, Maali Almeida, bears resemblance to the Sri Lankan journalist Richard de Zoysa, abducted and killed allegedly by the government's death squad in Colombo in 1990. Certainly, the

[1]In his first novel, Karunatilaka used cricket as a literary device, adding a dimension of apparent lightness and fun to the evocation of tragic history. As Harshana Rambukwella explains, the evocation of the national sport goes beyond what is supposed to be merely entertaining:

> The discourse of cricket becomes metonymic of the many socio-political concerns dominating public consciousness over the last few decades of the country. Bribery, corruption, racism, political chicanery, abductions, bloody acts of terrorism and most tellingly the inability to extricate reality from rumour form points of reference in the narrative that would resonate with most Sri Lankan readers (Rambukwella, 2010, p. 87).

interpretation of the novel as a mere re-enactment of such historical precedents would be reductive, yet those resemblances play an important role in the novel's metatextual inscription in personal and collective memory for a number of national and regional readers aware of Sri Lanka's painful history.

The novel's diegetic time is set in 1989 at the peak of the violence. The protagonist's retrospections refer, however, to the crucial events of 1983. Maali's recollections evoke the massacres commonly referred to as the Black July riots or the anti-Tamil pogrom, which were a series of violent attacks against the Tamil minority population. The immediate trigger for the violence was the killing of 13 Sri Lankan soldiers by the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on July 23, 1983, in an ambush in Jaffna. As we know, in response to the LTTE attack, anti-Tamil violence erupted across the country. Mobs, allegedly with the support of some elements within the government and security forces, targeted Tamil civilians, their homes, and businesses. The violence lasted for several days, from late July into early August 1983. Tamil neighbourhoods were particularly affected, with reports of looting, arson, and widespread destruction. The exact number of casualties is difficult to determine, but estimates suggest that hundreds, if not thousands, of Tamils were killed, and many more were injured. Thousands of Tamil families were displaced, seeking refuge in other parts of the country, or fleeing as refugees. The 1983 massacres had a profound and lasting impact on ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. The events further strained the relationship between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, contributing to the escalation of the long-standing ethnic conflict.

The Black July of 1983, which plays the central role in the novelistic narration as the trigger of the protagonist's engagement in documenting the massacres and providing evidence of war crimes, is often regarded—in the metatextual framing of the diegesis—as the turning point in the Sri Lankan Civil War. It marked a significant escalation of hostilities between the government forces and the Tamil militant groups, especially the LTTE. Undoubtedly, the events of Black July 1983 remain a painful chapter in Sri Lanka's history, symbolizing the deep-seated ethnic tensions that fuelled the civil war, which lasted until 2009 when the Sri Lankan government declared victory over the LTTE. The humoristic device adopted by Karunatilaka to speak about such a difficult chapter in his country's history is certainly controversial, and the criticism accompanying the novel's immediate reception promptly reflected the discomfort it caused. In the *Asian Review of Books*, Gayatri Devi commented: "The humour is somewhat unsettling. The novel is smart, it is funny, it is moving; but it is ultimately the heinous territory of genocide, torture, dismemberment, beheadings, and assassinations that we traverse" (Devi, 2022).

Such comments are not a surprise; Karunatilaka's literary choices are deliberately transgressive on many planes, including that of the linguistic option of English. Although his novel is among the first to gain such international acclaim, visibility, and appreciation (culminating in the Booker Prize), it should be put in the appropriate context of the literary history of his country. Karunatilaka's work is rooted in a wider landscape of English-speaking literature of Sri Lanka that may be perceived as an attempt to bridge a gap. Its particular blossoming in the years of the civil conflict and its aftermath may be associated with the crisis of vernacular languages brought about by conflicting ethnicities. This new wave of Anglophone writing may thus be seen as a literary phenomenon reflecting an interest in reconciliation (Jayasuriya, 2012). The (re)invention of Anglophone literature against conflicting vernaculars—especially against the Sinhala millenarian tradition of writing—helped to overcome the resentment against the English language treated as a mark of colonialism and elitism. As Maryse Jayasuriya and Aparna Halpé explain, English "is considered a class marker. It has often been referred to colloquially as 'kaduwa'—Sinhala for sword, which 'cuts down' or separates those who are not fluent in the language from the westernized elite" (2012, p. 17). In post-civil war Anglophone literature, it creates a space in the quest for new configurations of trans-ethnic identity. Also, under Karunatilaka's pen, posh language is trivialized and marginalized, becoming a bawdy, familiar speech of misfits and deviants. The writer 'Lankanizes' and tropicalizes his English, stuffing it with vernacular expressions. Certainly, many of his local references, such as the presence of rather idiomatic drinks and dishes (most prominently cola kenda, described as "green medicinal porridge with the consistency of vomit," p. 286), serve as markers of tropical exoticism for his global readers. At the same time, they trigger tropical identity for his national readers, building—away from the nationalistic pathos—a sense of shared destinies inscribed in the memory of childhood tastes marked by the tropical climate and food.

Overall, the writer's usage of familiar, bawdy, or deviant language, together with his device of queering the historical vision of the conflict, should be seen in a larger framework of attempts at defining multiple trans-identities across the cleavages of ethnicity, class, and gender. The writer paradoxically associates transgression with bridge-building. Photography comes to the fore in the narration not only as a means of expression adopted by the protagonist, but even more importantly, as a strategy of transgressive bridge-building, culminating, as we will see, in the encompassing vision of human and non-human solidarity.

Photography and Wars in the Tropics

On June 8, 1972, near Trang Bang village in South Vietnam, an Associated Press photographer, Nick Ut, took a picture illustrating the brutality of war. The image

features a naked nine-year-old girl running down a road with other children, her body severely burned by napalm. Although the discussion initially went into shockingly irrelevant aspects, such as the depiction of nudity (the girl's clothes had been instantaneously burned off her due to the extremely high temperature—over 1,000°C—of the napalm blast), the photograph quickly gained international attention and became a symbol of the horrors of war. It was published in numerous newspapers around the world, gained a Pulitzer Prize, and contributed to the anti-war sentiment during the Vietnam War. Certainly, it was only one among thousands of pictures, many of which depicted the conflict in gory details. In fact, the most gruesome aspect, the vertical stripes of skin completely burned down to the level of subcutaneous fat on the girl's back, are invisible in the photograph. The tropical vegetation denuded by exfoliants simply leaves an empty space; the obliterated tropical luxuriance is a significant absence. Examining the picture's transformation into an icon, Martin Kemp stated:

> One of the reasons why Ut's photograph has proved to exercise such continued power is because its human meaning is fiercely evident, with little ambiguity—even if we do not know the immediate circumstances in which a naked and screaming girl runs down a road peopled with men in military uniforms. It is so powerful that it sets much of its own context (Kemp, 2012, p. 205).

No wonder that the photographer protagonist in Shehan Karunatilaka's novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* nurtures the ambition of doing "for Lanka's civil war what naked napalm girl did for Vietnam" (p. 220).

In the Sri Lankan conflict portrayed in the novel, fire and bombs were equally common, and many civilian victims were burned alive, yet apparently none of the images of the conflict triggered such a lasting and profound response as Nick Ut's "Napalm Girl." Nonetheless, some iconic photographs can be identified. In his appreciation of Karunatilaka's novel, the American writer of Tamil origin, V.V. Ganeshananthan, is keen to launch a bridge between reality and fiction that the textual reference to photography seems to legitimate:

> Black July lives on through communal memory, of course, but also in photographs. A famous picture by photojournalist Chandragupta Amarasinghe shows a naked Tamil man cowering on a bench while several laughing young Sinhalese men swing their feet in his direction. One is preparing to kick him. Over the years, this image has arguably circulated more than any other depiction of the violence—undeniable proof of the cruelty of those days. How does such evidence pass into fiction? In Shehan

> Karunatilaka's novel...the photograph (or one strikingly like it) is taken by the eponymous character, who describes it as the "naked boy surrounded by dancing devils." Rather than publishing it, Maali has tucked it away in a box—along with a number of other politically explosive shots—in anticipation of the day when harm might befall him, just as it has so many other Sri Lankan journalists. (Ganeshananthan, 2023)

This box and the photographs that Maali Almeida hides under the bed of his mother's cook become central to the story. The ghost of the dead photographer strives to lure his loved ones to discover the box and make public this disquieting legacy.

Nonetheless, even inside the boundaries of the fictional world created by Karunatilaka, the final triumph of truth testified through the photographic medium never occurs. The exhibition organized in Colombo's art centre, slowly attracting moderate attention among the members of the city's elite, fails to provoke an outcry; initially, it begets only the ghosts of tourists rather than the members of the tropical community that should be concerned by its message. What is more, the potential of accusation included in the photos exhibited is quickly neutralised. The most compromising pictures—such as the meeting of political and military leaders with arms dealers—are surreptitiously removed by the concerned parties. What is more, the suspicion of political murder, looming throughout the narration, is utterly dismissed. Although the reader has been kept under the impression that the photographer most probably died for his work (killed for political reasons, as seems logical given the historical context presented in the novel), we discover that the true reason for the murder was his homosexual relationship. Maali Almeida is killed by his lover's father, who tries to protect his son from potential HIV infection. DD's father, the Minister Stanley Dharmendran, is alarmed by Maali's promiscuity, fears its consequences, and takes drastic measures to save his son from what he perceives as an extremely risky relationship. In the novel, the photographer's life, work, and death fail to aggrandize into an impactful tragedy and thus provoke a catharsis in Sri Lankan society. Finally, the whole affair falls into oblivion, just like the gruesome deaths of the conflict's many victims.

Certainly, the lack of impact of the Sri Lankan conflict, which, after raising international interest for a short time, became one of humanity's many forgotten wars, is truly revolting. Even more so is the shortage of memory that threw a shroud of silence over the thousands of victims. This appalling oblivion justifies the literary intervention to remind the world of this war. Karunatilaka evokes specific episodes, such as the Baticaloa Police Station massacre that took place on 11 June 1990 in which over six hundred unarmed police officers were killed by the Tamil Tigers' militant organisation, LTTE (2022, p. 79), or the village massacre in Trincomalee district, where hundreds of Tamil civilians were the victims (p. 107). The Omanthai massacre (p. 174) in which

seventy Tamil civilians were killed seems like a minor episode in this context. The kaleidoscopically changing places and sheer numbers of victims form a maddening gyre of suffering framed in strikingly beautiful, luxuriant locations (just to give an example, Trincomalee district is famous for its fine sand beaches, amenity to an ultramarine sea, and the closeness of both land-dwelling and aquatic wildlife). During his lifetime, Maali Almeida was forced to turn his back on these striking natural landscapes. Alienated from intimate, ecocentric connections with living beings by his inscription in the military structure, he recovers the interconnectedness with tropical nature only after his death. While alive, he worked under the horrifying figure of Major Raja Udugampola as an official photographer affiliated with the Sri Lankan Army. As a ghost, Maali explains to himself the reasons why he kept performing the job no one else wanted:

> None of the other photographers lasted more than two massacres. Most couldn't stomach the gore and many were averse to the high risk and average pay. But you were hooked. Because, according to silly old you, the problem was that the folks in Colombo and London and Delhi didn't know the full extent of the horror. And maybe clever young you could produce the photo that turned policymakers against the war. (2022, p. 220)

In a novel described as "bawdy" and "wisecracking" by *The Telegraph* reviewer Nikhil Krishnan (2022), a "state-of-the-nation satire" by *The Guardian*'s reviewer Tomiwa Owolade (2022), and a "darkly comedic ghost story" by Pasan Jayasinghe on *Frontline* (2022), Shehan Karunatilaka chose the grotesque, rather than pathetic, as the literary device able to counter the process of silencing and oblivion. The events are presented from the perspective of the dead, which paradoxically helps to mitigate the emotions triggered by the text. The tropical way of dealing with the affects differs from the temperate strategy of escalating them into a tragic resolution in a purifying moment of catharsis. The grotesque ghost story is a literary device serving affective de-escalation, releasing tension instead of building it up to a breakthrough, and fostering litotes instead of hyperbole as the leading rhetorical strategy. The ghosts, bearing their many wounds with ostentation, feel no pain. Only a minority of them choose to seek vengeance on the living, organizing a squad under the auspices of Kuveni, the primordial Sri Lankan queen transformed into the bloodthirsty figure of Mahakali. Most haunt the locations of their deaths or ride the winds to move to places where their names are individually invoked. The dead photographer stands out against this usual ghostly indolence as he has a mission of his own: to lead his lover and his best friend to the photographs that, he hopes, might still have a transformative power. However, as the expected impact of their discovery and exhibition results in dismal failure, the hero, having exerted his duties in the afterlife, resigns himself to jumping into the River of Rebirth which will obliterate the memory of his past existence. The only element that

remains is the choice of "going where you most belong," symbolized by his choice of the traditional kola kenda drink. This semi-liquid concoction made of raw rice, coconut milk, and some medicinal herbs epitomizes the nurturing aspect of tropicality. It stands for the vitalizing power of the food, marking the organic interdependence and inscription of the *homo tropicus* in his or her environment.

Looking back to this time of horror through the eyes of a ghost, the novelist has chosen a falsely lit, apparently funny, and entertaining way of speaking of his country's not-so-distant civil war past. As the novel looks up to national history from the perspective of a despised underground, the consequences of queering the historical panorama constructed through the figure of Maali Almeida are central to the analysis that follows.

History as a Widening Gyre

The literary formula of the comical ghost story employed by Karunatilaka provides a radically marginal focus: he proposes to contemplate the world of the living from the perspective of the dead. The gay photographer Maali Almeida wakes up after his death in a sort of bureaucratized version of Bardo, the Buddhist limbo,[2] as a part of an endless procession of victims channelled through the afterlife's peculiar proceedings, such as the ears check ("You need to get your ears checked. Your ears have patterns as personal as your fingerprints. The folds show past traumas, the lobes reveal sins, the cartilage hides guilt. All things that prevent you from entering The Light," p. 15). The 'seven moons' mentioned in the title of the novel mark the period of time Maali Almeida is supposed to remain in this intermediary state between his death and his final post-mortem destiny (entering 'The Light' or 'the River of Rebirth'). As Maali's ghost rides the winds and moves to various places where his name is invoked, the reader is dragged through a gory itinerary across multiple sites where the macabre Sri Lankan history goes on. In a vision that could be a depiction of the imaginary torments in Bardo, but nonetheless proves to be a part of this-world reality, bodies are chopped into pieces and thrown into the Lake Beira or stored in an industrial plant originally destined for frozen seafood. Soldiers are butchered, and victims of riots are burned alive. Finally, the itinerary of gore ends up in a torture place dubbed the Palace. The ubiquity of the spirit is used as a device permitting to the presentation of whatever was supposed to remain hidden: the government-sponsored violence, the foreign interests implied in arms deals, the sadistic sophistication of the persecutors ("The British sell us guns and the Americans train our torturers," p. 230).

Yet the treatment of history in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* goes beyond the criticism of human rights violations and the supposed aim of fostering critical memory concerning the genocide. What comes to the fore in the afterlife subordinated to the

[2] In some schools of Buddhism, Bardo (*antarābhava*) is a transitional, liminal state between death and rebirth.

Buddhist laws of cyclicity and rebirth is the unrelenting spectacle of violence, the unending aspect of history seen as a repetition of scenarios of oppression: "'It's all the same,' wails the dead woman with the dead baby. 'Every universe. Every life. Same old. Same old scene'" (2022, p. 16). The recent massacres are presented not as an exception, a fact that should provoke a scandal and an outcry, but rather as a common fate of humanity. What is more, as the narration goes on, widening circles of Sri Lankan history are evoked, finally reaching reference to the primordial queen Kuveni. Her transformation into the bloodthirsty goddess Mahakali (explained below), as well as the emergence of vindictive "Kuveni mission" squads in the final sequences of the novel, may illustrate the decay of benevolent national awareness into nationalistic ideology, precipitating in genocide.

At this point, it is once again useful to recapitulate briefly the history evoked in the text, yet on this occasion showing a wider panorama. Karunatilaka briefly revisits the decolonial and postcolonial issues. Sri Lanka was initially a part of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British empires. Throughout the novel, the painful colonial history is evoked by the episodic appearance of various ghost victims of oppression at the hands of successive colonizers. Yet once again, the scope is wider than just postcolonial criticism. The novelistic discourse is not addressed to any former metropolises that conquered the island in the twentieth century but quickly shifts the focus from the colonial to the country's mythical origins.

Be that as it may, it is useful to open a parenthesis for a metatextual framework of Sri Lankan history, focusing on the decolonial and postcolonial periods. The British gained control of the entire island of Ceylon, as it was then called, in 1815 after defeating the Kandyan Kingdom. During the early twentieth century, a sense of nationalism began to emerge among the Ceylonese people. This was partly a response to the colonial administration and demands for self-governance. In 1927-1931, the Donoughmore Commission was established by the British government to review the constitutional structure of Ceylon. Its recommendations, implemented in the 1931 Constitution, provided a limited form of self-government, introducing elected representatives to the State Council. During World War II, the British implemented further constitutional reforms in response to Ceylon's support for the war effort. The Ceylonese were given more representation and power through the Soulbury Commission (1944-1947), leading to the creation of a the new constitution, known as the Soulbury Constitution. It granted Ceylon dominion status within the British Commonwealth, allowing for a degree of self-rule. On February 4, 1948, Ceylon officially gained independence, with D.S. Senanayake becoming the country's first Prime Minister. The early years of independence were marked by efforts to address socio-economic issues and build a stable political structure. However, challenges such as ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority, as well as economic disparities, became

prominent issues over time. In 1972, under the leadership of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Ceylon changed its name to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, adding the impact of communist ideology to the list of possible violent factors. Also, as Ananda Wickremeratne (2006, p. 116) argues, the radical constitutional reform contributed to increasing ethnic tensions. They eventually led to a protracted civil conflict between the Sinhalese-dominated government and Tamil militant groups that persisted until the defeat of the LTTE in 2009.

Given this background, it is little wonder that the postcolonial history of the country is contemplated with a profound pessimism. The novel builds upon the traditional Sri Lankan belief in *nakath*, the auspiciousness of determined moments or time periods. The *nakath* notion is used to proclaim a generally dismal vision of the decolonization: 1948—the year of independence of Ceylon, as well as other territories such as the Philippines—is presented as a most unfortunate, unpropitious timing. The Dead Bodyguard, one of the infernal creatures that Maali Almeida encounters in the afterlife, presents Sri Lanka's journey to independence as reflecting the broader wave of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century. It exemplifies a general, macabre failure of newly independent yet "cursed" nations in establishing stable governance and addressing historical grievances: "The creature yells out the names of five countries.… 'Burma. Israel. North Korea. Apartheid South Africa. Sri Lanka. All born in '48.'" (2022, p. 128).

The dark vision of "cursed" history spreads far beyond colonization and its postcolonial consequences. Instead of formulating yet another instance of postcolonial criticism, Karunatilaka dives deeper into his country's history, exploring its past down to the mythical origins inscribed in Saivite cosmovision. The historical "curse" comes in touch with the island's remotest beginnings and their textual representation. Kuveni, evoked in Karunatilaka's text, was the queen of the mythical Nagas, the primordial serpent-like inhabitants of the island. Her transformation leads from a maternal figure into the demonic Mahakali, the goddess of Time and Death wearing a garland of skulls or severed human heads. At the same time, the primordial, maternal figure converges with the paradigm of the feminine godhead of Nature, representing Prakriti, the natural, original form or condition, the primary substance of beings and things.

One of the textual references evoked in the novel is the *Mahāvaṁsa*. This historical chronicle, styled as an epic poem written in Pali, relates the remotest past of the island since its legendary beginnings and the arrival of Prince Vijaya from India in 543 BCE up to the reign of Mahasena (277-304 CE). It is believed to have been composed by a Buddhist monk at the Mahāvihāra temple in Anuradhapura in the fifth or sixth century CE. He may have compiled ancient records kept at the monastery even as early as the third century BCE; he might also have made use of other, more recent texts, such

as the chronicle known as the *Dipavaṁsa*, composed in the fourth century CE. The writings accentuate the notion of continuity. As K.M. de Silva affirms, the *Mahāvaṁsa* was celebrated as

> a sophisticated accomplishment and one which succeeding generations used, quoted with pride as the definitive work on the island's history, and felt compelled to update. Its continuation—the *Cūlavaṁsa,* attributed to Dhammakitti in the twelfth century—surveyed the island's history up to the reign of Parākramabāhu I (1153–86). A subsequent extension by another bhikkhu[3] took the story to the fourteenth century and it was concluded by yet another in the late eighteenth century (De Silva, 2005, p. 79).

Be that as it may, the *Mahāvaṁsa* usually celebrated for such contents as the relation of the Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka and the history of the Buddhist congregation (*Sangha*) becomes, in Karunatilaka's novel, a manipulative text testifying that "the Sinhalese race was founded on kidnapping, rape, parricide and incest," "a chronicle used to codify laws crafted to suppress all that is not Sinhalese and Buddhist and male and wealthy" (2022, p. 125). The Dead Bodyguard, "the Minister's shadow" (p. 123) encountered in the afterlife, helps to elucidate the current political problem that has a lot to do with the question of establishing who was the island's first inhabitant and to whom the island 'truly' belongs:

> Once upon a time in north India, a princess meets a lion. Lion kidnaps and forces self on princess. Princess gives birth to girl and boy. Boy grows up, kills lion-father, becomes king, marries sister. She gives birth to boy, who becomes troublemaker, who is banished with seven hundred flunkies, who arrive in ships on the shores of Ceylon.
>
> Prince Vijaya and his band of bald thugs kick-start our history by slaughtering the native Naga people and seducing their queen, though perhaps not in that order. If the origin story is true, the mess we are in should be no surprise. Betrayed and ruined by the callous prince, Queen Kuveni of the Naga tribe curses the land before she kills herself and abandons her children to the forest. The curse sticks for a few millennia and, in 1990, shows no signs of lifting.
>
> 'Our ancestors have literally been demonised,' says the creature. 'I have heard that the Mahakali is a descendant of Kuveni. Some say she is Kuveni herself.' (2022, p. 125).

The way in which the manipulative potency of the ancient text is evoked in the contemporary novel may, to some degree, be explained as a characteristic of local

[3] A bhikkhu is an ordained male in Buddhist monasticism; a mendicant monk.

cultural legacy. According to Steven Kemper, the historical writings compiled in the *Mahāvaṁsa*

> demonstrate a characteristic way of legitimating present-day arrangements. Great emphasis has been placed throughout the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka on the idea that the connection between past and present must be unbroken, whether between a sacred place and the historical events that created its importance or between a group of monks and the historical origins that guarantee the authenticity of their teachings. (1991, p. 33).

The legitimation of Sinhalese nationalism and the contemporary status quo through ancient texts evoked in the novel, is thus deeply rooted in Sri Lankan specificity. In this regard, it should also be noted that the disproportion of the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority might also be projected through the scriptural domain. The majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist tradition wields the pen, controlling the written transmission of historical memory, while the Tamil minority used to rely to a far greater degree on oral transmission. The critical vision, aware of the inglorious legacies of "kidnapping, rape, parricide and incest" that the monstrous creature epitomizes, can only be read in the interstices of the long-lasting written traditions to which such textual monuments as the *Mahāvaṁsa* testify.

More crucially, shifting the focus from postcolonial, reconciliation, or Human Rights optics to a trans-historical vision involving the legendary beginnings and foundational texts enlarges the scope of the novel. The civil war and genocide in Sri Lanka drifts from relatively 'positivistic' perspectives to an almost cosmogonic vision in which such events as massacres are unavoidable since they form an underlying structure of the aeons under the auspices of Kuveni-Mahakali. The normalized evil is destined to oblivion in the endless cycle of reincarnations, not only of bodies, but also of violent impulses and gory scenarios.

Marginality and Resilience

The depiction of the events from the otherworldly perspective of a ghost helps to relativize their importance. Of course, such relativization should be seen as a rhetorical use of litotes. Ultimately, it serves to accentuate the importance of the reality it describes in diminutive terms. The queering of the historical vision may also be regarded as an example of litotes. After all, the national history is supposed to be made by 'male' men, not the despised queer figures, repeatedly referred to in the novel as "faggot", "ponnaya" (a Sinhalese word to refer to a man attracted to other men), and a variety of other contemptuous terms.

Shortly after the outbreak of the civil war some elements within the Sri Lankan government were accused of complicity in the violence. The government was criticised for not having taken sufficient measures to control the situation or protect the Tamil minority. In close parallel between fact and fiction, Karunatilaka portrays the members of the government in a grotesque way. Similarly, Colombo's social elite are portrayed in an unfavourable light. DD, the son of a minister, is a member of this group. Maali lives with him in one of the city's privileged neighbourhoods. Yet because Maali is the gay partner of the son of an important father, the novelistic portrayal is made from a position that is paradoxically central and marginal, marked by multiple layers of exclusion. What is more, Maali, the misbehaving sex partner, is eliminated when DD's father kills him, throwing him from the balcony overlooking the rubbish dump. This is why the grotesque presentation of the social elite is made by a ghost, an entity that is naturally marginal, excluded—in this case almost literarily 'kicked' out—of the world of the living.

This double—queer and ghostly—aspect of exclusion linked to Maali's sexuality coexists with other dimensions of secrecy and obliteration. Colombo has multiple spheres of suspicious underground operators, most importantly arms dealers. Acting under the disguise of foreign reporters and movie makers, they represent various arms-producing third parties offering their merchandise to both sides of the conflict. In this way, the civil war is triggered and nurtured by groups serving the commercial interests of countries exporting arms, such as Great Britain and Israel. The island is manipulated from abroad—kicked off balance by external forces intervening in the tropical country's history.

Certainly, multiple dimensions of guilt, responsibility, and punishment are evoked throughout the novel. The gay photographer appears 'guilty' of his sexual promiscuity and insouciance (the deadly dangers of HIV infection and AIDS are repeatedly invoked). He is also repeatedly 'punished' for his behaviour (among other instances, he loses his job as the army photographer under the allegation of maintaining "unnatural relations" with soldiers). These 'sinful' deeds and aspects contrast, however, with the gravity of other people's moral corruption and their impunity.

Against the background of violence and corruption of the 'male' men, the commitment to justice of the gay photographer is sketched in broad, energetic strokes. Maali repeatedly refuses to take sides in the conflict ("I am on the side that wants to stop Sri Lankans dying like this," p. 101). He is identified primarily by his sexual ("homo", "queer", "ponnaya") identity rather than ethnicity or commitment to a faction. His marginality helps him to occupy a transcending position in relation to the conflict. He is not integrated into a group of aggressive males—as a "sissy", he has no place there. Also, he adopts marginal duties and roles in the margin. During his stay in the military

base of Major Raja Udugampola, the horrifying supervisor of multiple massacres, Maali is not enlisted as a soldier, but employed as a professional photographer. His marginal role permits him to transcend the binary opposition of victims and perpetrators.

Queering war photography permits the author to explore clandestine social networks and convert them to the cause of political justice. In his activity as a politically engaged photographer, Maali exploits the connections he initially established due to his sexual promiscuity. He also invests new meaning to the old habits of discretion and secrecy characterizing the queer milieu. To develop his most compromising photographs, he relies on the lab belonging to one of his lovers. As a part of his grotesque literary device, the author intermingles the details referring to queer sexuality (the size of Viran's penis) and the technical aspects of the photographic prints. The information concerning a clandestine sexual meeting and the mission of making public the compromising pictures is interwoven in the torrent of discourse produced by the ghost:

> You met Viran down at the New Olympia cinema at a 10 a.m. screening of *Escape to Athena* starring Roger Moore, Telly Savalas and Stefanie Powers, watched by straight couples fornicating and men fondling men. He was five feet two but had seven inches where it mattered. He also had an interest in old cameras and a job at FujiKodak and a dark room in Kelaniya with some serious kit that he'd inherited from his uncle. He was delicate and talented, smelled like soap and talcum, and was uninterested in politics. Until he saw your JVP photos for the Associated Press.
>
> You told him that if a beautiful boy and a girl with big hair walked in one day carrying Elvis and Queen records and asked for him, he was to take the negatives home and develop them to eight-by-ten prints with low light and extra contrast. (2022, p. 244).

It is also significant that Maali tells his closest friends about the compromising shots in a conversation that takes places during a transgressive, psychedelic party. He mentions that he has prepared some sort of hidden legacy destined specifically to each of them according to a code: "The box is white and has card names written on it in red and black felt pen. The titles form a royal straight: Ace of Diamonds, King of Clubs, Queen of Spades, Jack and Ten of Hearts" (2022, p. 109).

Maali uses the opportunity of the transgressive party to 'uncloset' not his sexual orientation but the truth about the evil infesting Sri Lankan society. Yet at the same time, a paradoxical, positive valorization of the closet comes to the fore. Queer connections and solidarities appear as a backup network within the divided society. The clandestine underground of gay sexuality appears as a reserve of community

resilience when it puts its resources at the disposition of the photographer who dares to reveal the political truth. In the eroded society, the just cause—such as that of alerting the public to guilty politicians and arms deals backing the conflict—finds no other place but an art gallery run by Maali's queer friends. They face considerable personal risk to exhibit his compromising photographs, sharing his hope that the exhibited pictures may help to solve the country's political conundrum.

Multiple instances of framing—closets, boxes, photographic shots—acquire a positive value. The guilty deeds are captured. The pictures may become proofs. Inverting the logic of sexual blame to which the queer community had been constantly exposed, they exploit the meagre, fragile resources they possess to sustain the accusation against the perpetrators of violence and political—rather than sexual—crimes. Maali has the idea of identifying the perpetrators of massacres by amplifying the photos he had taken and sharpening the contrast. As the activists hope, his shots may be referred to yet another photographic work, the national ID photos archive. The role of photography in the resolution of the conflict is thus crucial. The perpetrators of massacres acted as anonymous members of a mob, persuaded of their impunity as long as they could not be identified. Their violence relied on their perception of blending with the aggressive group. Photography reveals and puts into the limelight the faces, therefore the individual responsibility that was suspended during the genocide. In 1983, in the heat of the conflict, the faces had been symbolically blurred. The guilt of the anonymous perpetrators was diluted and shifted from individuals to the mob. Also, the faces of the victims became obliterated in the mass violence. Both the dignity of the victims and the moral integrity of the perpetrators suffered decomposition. Photography plays a crucial role in the symbolic restitution of the status of the human face as a locus of dignity and integrity.

The Leopard and the Pangolin

The history of photography as the significant background of the central novelistic personage could be narrated another way. Rather than starting with the "Napalm Girl" evoked at the beginning of this essay, it could begin with Lionel Wendt's photobook *Ceylon*, published posthumously in 1950, and gathering together his photographs taken between 1933 and 1944. Like Maali Almeida's story, Wendt's photographic narration deals with homosexuality, banished not by the local culture but by the colonial British, who outlawed it as "unnatural". The Sri Lankan photographer is present on the pages of Karunatilaka's novel as the patron figure of the art centre in Colombo where Maali's exhibition takes place—the Lionel Wendt Gallery. Through his artistic work, Wendt confronted and criticised the biopolitics extending the colonial control over both sexuality and nature. The historian of modern art, Edwin Coomasaru (2023), argues that the photographic book *Ceylon* exemplifies a queer environmental aesthetic

associating queer male sexuality and landscapes. British colonial power aimed at the eradication of the local lifestyle based on abundance, striving to introduce exploitation and artificial scarcity by enclosing lands, especially the traditional self-sustaining commons. According to the British colonial mindset, the indolent attitudes of the natives and their lasciviousness were to be channelled in a strictly 'moralized' system of forced, controlled, and disciplined work:

> An abundant understanding of sexuality would be one in which it is not organised on procreative lines solely for the production of a colonial workforce by criminalising or privatising queer intimacy. *Ceylon* pictured queer environmental abundance as an anti-colonial project: it portrayed spiritual landscapes and homoerotic desire, refusing to naturalise its subjects but revealing them as socially staged, using documentary-style photos to contribute to national consciousness while emphasising imaginative possibilities through surrealist-inspired imagery. (Coomasaru, 2023, p. 759)

As the story of the socially unfit case of Maali Almeida shows, the queer lifestyle, 'immoralized' and undisciplined, opens a space of political sedition. This 'unruly' potential fosters a bold, intransigent commitment with a just political cause that truly serves the community. Paradoxically, the restitution of social stability and resilience, under great strain due to civil war, starts from the marginalized underground moved by homoerotic desires.

The novel's ending sequences ostensibly mark the failure of the protagonist's mission (understood as a hope of producing and exhibiting pictures that might 'bring down governments') as the exhibition places Maali's creative endeavour under the auspices of Wendt's (rather than Ut's) photography. Maali's photographs exhibited in the gallery are treated with indifference, leading to the formulation of awkward and bitter questions to which no positive answer can be given: "So what about your photos? Did they shake up the world? Did they burst the Colombo bubble?" (2022, p. 325). Certainly, the photos fail to 'bring down governments.' Nonetheless, at a closer glance, Maali wins as an artist, revealing the island's true vitality rather than horror and gore. He is to be remembered as a photographer of intimacy rather than genocide. The truly transformative shots are of his sleeping lover, or those memorizing moments of happiness and community that linked him to his best friend (and presumed girlfriend), Jaki. Ultimately, the public's attention goes to the photos of a Sri Lankan leopard and a pangolin, tropical animals that may appear as compelling symbols of strength and resilience.

The final victory of animals over humans, at least on a symbolic level, opens up an ecocentric and ecocritical atmosphere in thinking about Sri Lanka. Such is the conclusion of a nihilistic story in which the creative use of an afterlife perspective makes blatant the absence of final judgment or supernatural justice: "How else to explain the world's madness? If there's a heavenly father, he must be like your father: absent, lazy and possibly evil" (2022, p. 25). In the afterlife, Maali quickly discovers that there is no prospect of paradise or hell; good and bad deeds will simply be forgotten. Thus, oblivion obliterates the expectation of punishment of the culprits. Even the "Kuveni Squad", a group of ghosts moved by a the thirst for vengeance, leads to the further spread of evil and havoc rather than justice. The Buddhist worldview remoulded in the novel suggests an ecocentric idea of reconciliation, not between the conflicting ethnicities, but between humans and nature. In the afterlife, Maali encounters the ghost of a leopard and learns—to his considerable surprise—that animal spirits participate in the cycle of rebirth just like human souls. He is thus forced to modify his initial anthropocentric mindset. In his lifetime, Maali openly rejected ecological and environmental ideals as he believed that documenting the genocide was a far more urgent task: "Come to Jaffna, you told DD. You will see this country faces bigger issues than the loss of habitat of the native pangolin.… If you saw what was happening to your people, you wouldn't be worried about smelly lakes" (2022, p. 118).

The photo of the pangolin, unimportant in connection to the massacre, finds its way to the final collection that Maali hides in his box under the bed, perhaps in the hope that it might acquire a patrimonial value, become a transformative legacy for the whole community. The nature photos are collected in the envelope marked as "The Perfect Ten" and destined specifically for Maali's lover, DD:

> He is looking at wildlife photographs from Yala and Wilpattu, where he was present at the taking. They are from the envelope marked 'The Perfect Ten', the only envelope out of the five not to contain ugliness.
>
> The storks at sunset, the elephants at dawn, the leopard in the tree, the snake in the grass, the obligatory peacock shot. And then there were the dozen photos of the pangolin that wandered into your camp at sunrise when you were stroking DD awake while Jaki snored.…
>
> You have close-ups of this strange creature, an evolutionary hybrid that makes the duck-billed platypus look commonplace. A mammal with scales, with the tail of a monkey, the claws of a bear and the snout of an anteater. Part dinosaur, part house cat. If we must have an animal as a national symbol, why not a pangolin, something original that we can own. (2022, p. 262-263).

What remains from Maali Almeida's legacy is photography of luxuriance. Certainly, it does not stop wars, yet it fosters the sense of interconnectedness of all beings, an intimate relation with the totality of life. Queer ecologies are characterised by "coalitions, empathy, interdependency" (Chwala, 2019, p. 143). The ethical consequences of this stance are the only positive message that arises in the aftermath of the story that maintained a nihilistic bias throughout the narrative. It permits us to associate Shehan Karunatilaka's writing within the domain of queer ecologies as defined by writer and scholar Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2010, 2016), who argued that ecological concerns and policies connected with a queer perspective may contribute with subtler forms of sensibility and intellectual inquiry than environmentalism rooted in dominant heteronormativity. The process of queering the account of the Sri Lankan past leads to a radical redesigning of the anthropocentric category of history. The afterlife perspective, constructed on the Buddhist ideas of cycles of human and non-human incarnations, relativizes the importance of history and places it within the specificity of a tropical cosmovision.

What emerges as an outcome of Maali's life and post-mortem adventures is an ecocentric proposal accentuating human responsibility towards life conceived as a totality of beings. The crucial role in this shift of perspective is played by Dead Leopard, with whom Maali has an extensive and profound conversation at the close of the novel (2022, p. 328-331). The faith in humanity is restored by the animal ghost admiring mankind's transformative capacities and keenly interested in reincarnating into a human body. Hopefully, this humanity nurtured by an animal contribution will mitigate its destructive impact.

The figure of Dead Leopard plays the role of the ancient Greek psychopomp (the guide of souls in the afterlife), accompanying Maali Almeida on his way to the River of Rebirths. Significantly, plants also play a crucial role in the afterlife as psychopomp markers of particular, transformative locations—such as the exact spot where the River of Rebirths should be approached. Such is the case of a kumbuk tree (*Terminalia arjuna*). This majestic plant with a broad base and smooth, grey bark is known in Theravada Buddhism as the tree of enlightenment. What is more, the leopard is envisioned—and captured on in the photograph belonging to the envelope identified as 'the Perfect Ten'—not as a separate being, but in its interconnectedness with the branch of the tree where it rests. The pose of the resting leopard, almost merging with the tree, serves as a visual symbol epitomizing the plenitude of tropical interconnectedness and expansive, unbound vitality.

Conclusion: Intimate Connections

As suggested in the introduction to this essay, queer lifestyle develops inside imposed framing, referred to synthetically through the metaphor of the closet. Throughout his lifetime, the novel's queer photographer resigns himself to the necessity of maintaining secrecy, keeping his multiple affairs 'closeted'. He hides the compromising photographs in a box under the bed of his mother's cook. The photos themselves imply the idea of frame, presenting merely a fragment of a larger vision; they are intrinsically 'closeted'. Those proliferating forms of secrecy and self-restriction build up a scheme of encapsulated interiors containing transformative energy. However, his death, and the perspective of the afterlife, help to broaden the vision, making Maali strive for de-framing and exhibition of whatever was contained and kept away from the public eye. The 'closeted' queer energies strive for deployment. Revealed, they provoke a slight, yet significant evolution of awareness, despite the apparent failure of the exposition in the art centre.

The progression of Karunatilaka's narration demystifies the idealistic trust deposited in the idea that "these are photos that will bring down governments. Photos that could stop wars" (2022, p. 6). The human rights and genocide perspective, which has often been the focus of the existing criticism of Karunatilaka's novel, should leave space for the ecocentric message that emerges at the outcome of the narration. The reconciliation promoted in the novel transcends the interethnic level, launching a bridge across the boundaries of human, animal, and even vegetal life, so important in the lush, tropical context of Sri Lanka. The photographed leopard's pose on the branch of a tree is not just a picturesque location but a symbol of the profound solidarity and unity of life. The range of queer relations expands beyond Maali's relationship with his lover DD and his friend Jaki, not only through the promiscuous proliferation of his sexual contacts but also through intimate connection with non-human life.

Queering the thinking about Sri Lanka, the writer fosters the expansion of attention and awareness beyond the perimeter of human history and memory, no matter how pressing and painful. The photographer's Nikon camera was an optical instrument forcing him to focus on fragments of reality, framing dead bodies and shameful encounters. Yet the proliferation of shots finally permitted him to transcend this focus. Photography, like history, expands into a widening gyre, the circle of queer intimacy encompasses all beings. Investing in the imagery of broadening, unbounded perspectives, Karunatilaka overcomes not only the marginality of his gay protagonist but also the normative understanding of the politics of interethnic conflict, expanding our understanding to notions of co-presence and co-existence, and our inherent interrelations with the more-than-human world.

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