

Afterlife and activism: The confluence of spectrality and implication in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

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Abstract: Implicated subjects play a crucial role in activism by revealing hidden truths and reviving suppressed voices. This study investigates the potential of a 'complexly' implicated subject in narrativizing the experience of Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala communities during the Sri Lankan civil war and engaging in memory activism. The textual analysis of Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) through the lens of hauntology deliberates on memory, absence, truth and their intricate entanglement. Situated on the intersections of implication and spectrality, the protagonist Maali Almeida acts as a reminder and a remainder, continually underscoring the inextricable links between the past and the present. Firstly, this paper dwells on the construction of Maali Almeida as a subject of complex implication. Secondly, it examines how witnessing and spectrality influence the protagonist's functions of reminding and remaining. The paper thus illustrates the unconventional modes of memory activism initiated by a specter and its indispensability in charting absences.

Keywords: implication, memory activism, specter, absence

Introduction

Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* provides a counter narrative of the Sri Lankan civil war through the interplay between fact and fiction. With a protagonist who is a specter inhabiting the afterlife, the novel is a profound deliberation on the invisibility of truths and fissures in history. A hauntological approach to the text reveals the indomitable presence of unresolved pasts that demand acknowledgement and fuel memory activism. Employing the theories of implicated subjects and implicated memory activism, this paper examines the role of the 'complexly' implicated subject as a memory

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activist. Through the interrogation of the relationship between the protagonist's spectrality and implicated memory activism, the paper attempts to answer the question: How does spectrality and activism intersect to counter the hegemonic forces that erase rather than engage with absence?

Published in 2022, the novel revolves around the murdered queer photojournalist Maali Almeida, who crosses over to the afterlife. As a specter, the protagonist is given a period of seven moons or a week within which he must choose to remain continually in the afterlife referred to as the 'In Between' or travel to 'The Light,' a space that facilitates rebirth by offering a "fresh start" (Karunatilaka 2022, 286). Maali Almeida embarks on a mission to exhibit a collection of photographs that reveal various facets of the Sri Lankan civil war before travelling to 'The Light' on the seventh day. According to Avery Gordon (2008, 17), writing ghost stories is an exercise in writing about exclusions and invisibilities. Being a ghost story, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is a novel about exclusions based on ethnicity and sexuality, invisible people (both victims and implied subjects) and one specter's quest for creating a countermemory. Karunatilaka's novel transforms the dominant understanding of the civil war by eschewing the victim versus perpetrator binary, challenges the vilification of Tamil community and unearths, if not accuse, the state's role in the civil war. The paper borrows the idea of the implicated subject by Michael Rothberg to analyze Maali Almeida's positionality as a case of complex implication. It also relies on Jennifer Noji and Michael Rothberg's concept of implicated memory activism to understand how the specter functions as both a reminder of erased memories and a remainder or a ghostly trace.

A case of complex implication

The Sri Lankan civil war was a series of ethnic conflicts that culminated in the Tamil genocide in 2009. It was not only a conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but a violent attempt at consolidating a national identity that was Sinhala in its outlook by harbouring hostility towards the Sri Lankan Tamil community. The novel avoids siding with any faction in the civil war, portraying both the Sri Lankan government and LTTE as perpetrators while depicting Tamils and Sinhalas collectively as victims. Such a classification bears the risk of conflating specificities that may affect the identity of ethnic

communities. However, the recognition of collective trauma in this case allows memory activism from the civilian space to originate without the constraints of cultural particularities thereby aiding the combined fight against perpetrators.

Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* offers a commentary on the categorization of the perpetrators and victims, using fiction to corroborate the status and function of implicated subjects within this dynamic. In his work, *The Implicated Subject*, Michael Rothberg (2019, 91) introduces the concept of complex implication as the experience of "occupying positions that align one both to histories of victimization and to histories of perpetration." Inhabiting this liminal space, the implicated subject performs the role of an observer and a participant. Maali Almeida is not a perpetrator but a 'perpetuator' who is implicated in the production of injustice. His allegiance to the systems that allow, inflict, and sustain oppression and political persecutions makes him a perpetuator.

Born to a half-Burgher and half-Tamil mother and a Sinhala father, Malinda Almeida Kabalana's Sinhala sounding name exemplifies his undisputable belonging to a country that is antagonistic to Tamils. However in a situation where a Sinhala name can garner unwarranted suspicion from the LTTE and other allies, Maali Almeida asserts his Sri Lankan identity over his Sinhala and Tamil-Burgher roots. During a conversation with Elsa Mathangi from Canada Norway Third World Relief (CNTR), Maali claims that he no longer refers to himself as a Sinhala after 1983 and that Tamils and Sinhala were all "Sri Lankans, children of Kuveni, bastards of Vijaya" (Karunatilaka 2022, 106). Maali Almeida's complex implication makes him an associate of the two warring ethnic communities despite his insistence on remaining neutral. In another instance when Stanley Dharmendran, the Tamil cabinet minister in the Sri Lankan government and the father of his love interest Dilan Dharmendran, asks Maali Almeida, "So what are you?" the latter replies, "A Sri Lankan" (Ibid, 232). The emphasis on Sri Lankan identity is a political act not devoid of ideological underpinnings on who constitutes the nation.

In the afterlife, Sena Pathirana, a JVP organizer rightly calls him, "Dinner party activist. Photographer of all sides" criticizing his neutrality (Ibid, 96). Maali Almeida's conscious choice of not leaning towards one or the other ethnic roots ultimately reinforces his implication, where he identifies with the histories of both the perpetrators and the victims. The refusal to take sides highlights the

“actions or inactions” of the implicated subjects that “help produce and reproduce the positions of victim and perpetrator” (Rothberg 2019, 1). However, when the awareness of the implication emerges, Maali Almeida begins to exploit his status as an implicated subject to expose the perpetrators. Elsa Mathangi, representing CNTR, enlists Maali Almeida’s support for Tamil victims by highlighting the Sri Lankan government’s unacknowledged atrocities in 1983. At the Arts Centre Club, she urges him, “Your photos will help change that. Tell me, *kolla*. Which side are you on?” (Karunatilaka 2022, 107) Initially neutral, Maali confronts his inaction but hesitates to fully commit to CNTR. When asked again at Hotel Leo, he responds, “I am on the side that wants to stop Sri Lankans from dying like this” (Ibid, 109). Later, when pressed a third time, he replies, “The side that pays me” (110). Ultimately, Maali agrees for three reasons: payment, his presence during the riots, and his belief that the government had “a lot of answering to do” (Ibid, 111). The change in his replies and the acceptance of the assignments signal his internal conflicts as he utilizes his implication albeit with caution. Although Maali Almeida is unaware of the “critical political intervention” that the embrace of implication can bring about, he recognizes the challenge implicated subjects can pose to the perpetrators (Rothberg 2019, 120). Hence, his mission to photograph becomes an act of bearing witness rather than a means of sustenance. During his conversation with Dilan Dharmendran, he accuses Dilan’s father for his inability to condemn the government’s shelling of civilians in Jaffna by asserting “You can use your privilege to help others or exclude them” (Karunatilaka 2022, 234). Not only does Maali Almeida recognize his role as an implicated subject but also cultivates the faculty to distinguish between the positions other people occupy as perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders. His identity as an implicated subject is not incontestable or permanent. As Rothberg (2019, 8) expounds, implicated subjects might become “victims, perpetrators or descendants of victims” in “other histories and other structures.” Maali Almeida’s murder exemplifies his transition from an implicated subject to a victim. Unlike Tamils and Sinhalas who are rendered victims due to their positions as civilians, his victimhood emerges from his homosexuality, transforming him into a specter.

Stanley Dharmendran murders Maali Almeida by forcing him to ingest cyanide from the capsule the latter wore as a chain around his neck. Maali Almeida’s disappearance is linked to his political

associations, the groups and organizations that had contributed to his status as an implicated subject. It is the disappearance that begins the process of haunting, even before his death is ascertained. His disappearance is not an isolated event but one that brings with it, a history of well-orchestrated disappearances of unsuspecting civilians, Tamils and Sinhals. Evaluating the crime dynamics in Sri Lanka, Anoma Pieris (2019, 53) writes that “Mobs, fires, loss, concealment, surveillance, disappearances and escalating degrees of social and physical dispossession” characterized the turbulent period after 1983. While Maali Almeida is murdered for his relationship with Dilan Dharmendran, his death is treated as an instance of disappearance due to political affiliations. It is the protagonist’s implication in the civil war that compels this misconception to hold water. Despite his murder being tied to his sexuality, a concern that is seemingly distant from the societal conditions during the civil war in the 1980s, the narrative surrounding his death indicates how conveniently power can be used to misdirect investigations on disappearances and suppress threats to authority while evading legal consequences. Writing at length about the state’s role in using disappearance as a method to control and inhibit opposition, Gordon (2008, 127) classifies those who disappeared into two categories. The first category encapsulates the disappeared who return while the second category of the disappeared reappears only as apparitions. Maali Almeida who disappears, dies and reappears as a specter, belongs to the second category. His return is neither coincidental nor phantasmagorical, but one that is necessary, expected and longed for. Implication, like spectrality, transcends mortality, facilitating the specter to embody the intertwined threads of past and present, perpetuation and victimization and complicity and morality. His distinct links to injustices as a perpetrator and a victim refashion his complex implication as a favourable position from which activism takes root.

‘Complexly’ implicated subjects are witnesses to the crimes of the perpetrators and the sufferings of the victims. This dual affiliation without absolute commitment to either of the contrasting positions, enables the implicated subject to expose the conflicted nature of history. Considering implicated subjects as “agents of memory activism,” Jennifer Noji and Michael Rothberg (2023, 81) emphasize on how “historical and political responsibility” drives memory activism and the “particularly powerful impetus to change” that emerges when “memories of injustice combine with a sense of present-

day implication.” Employed as a photographer, Maali Almeida is an implicated subject who witnesses the horrors that unfolded during the civil war. When Sena asks Maali Almeida what his purpose was in the physical realm or ‘Down There’, Maali replies, “I was there to witness. That is all. All those sunrises and all those massacres existed because I filmed them” (Karunatilaka 2022, 242). This exemplifies the protagonist’s acknowledgment of his implication and the potential of documenting his witnesses as a tool to defy the repressive regime imposed on civilians. It entails considering the specter as a reminder and a remainder. As a reminder of obliterated memories and systemic erasures, the specter channelizes what it has witnessed to inspire action. The specter as the remainder, is a persistent presence utilizing its power to haunt for activist pursuits. Maali Almeida’s positionality built on the intersections of complex implication and spectrality, thus allows him to critique the interplay of history and memory through memory activism.

Witnessing and/as reminding

The act of witnessing fosters a profound understanding of contested pasts to streamline memory activism initiated by the implicated subject. Maali Almeida’s experience of witnessing emerges from his position of implication rather than victimization. Relying on witnessed events to engage in implicated memory activism becomes an agentic process as the protagonist’s past inactions are transformed into active efforts to reveal truths and (re)write history. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag (1977, 5) posits that photographs “furnish evidence” and asserts that the camera record either “incriminates” or “justifies.” The photographs taken by Maali Almeida are instruments of evidence that on one hand, incriminate the state and other militant groups and on the other, justify the call for justice. The functions are linked causally as the incrimination of state actors inspires non-state actors like Maali Almeida to seek justice.

As a witness to the events that shaped the early stages of the civil war, Maali Almeida photographs the Sooriyakanda mass grave where the skeletons of young boys were strewn across. They had been killed for “taunting the son of a school principal,” who had connections to a colonel in the Special Task Force (Karunatilaka 2022, 36). The photograph becomes essential for its forensic and legal significance. It also functions as a forensic mode which elicits “cultural remembering that is concerned with claim-making and contestation” (Bøndergaard

2017, 5). On the level of claim-making, the photograph of the mass graves suggests the culpability of the state in unleashing large-scale violence. It also contests the manipulation of history by the perpetrators who forced the young boys to write suicide notes before being executed (Karunatilaka 2022, 36). It thus reveals how outwardly disparate incidents are intrinsically tied to the dominant narratives that do not incorporate accountability as an essential element to address violence.

Maali Almeida photographs a woman being “dragged by the hair and doused in petrol” during the Pettah bomb blast in 1983 (Ibid, 60). Despite paying for the photograph, the protagonist notes that Newsweek failed to publish the same. In *Understanding a Photograph* John Berger (2013, 56) writes, “most photographs taken of people are about suffering, and most of that suffering is man-made.” Berger’s observation and Almeida’s motives underscore how photographs are records of deliberate and intentional violence inflicted by the state and LTTE. The photographs also exemplify the partialness with which narratives, even those claiming to be factual like journalism, are crafted. Moreover, the photographs document the mechanisms used by both the government and LTTE to instill fear, disturb social harmony and create and intensify the discord between the Sinhala and Tamil population. Analyzing the warfare tactics employed during the civil war, Anoma Pieris (2019, 105) states that the government forces engaged in massacres, aerial bombings and shelling while attacks by LTTE included bombs, landmines, suicide bombings. The photographs of the sites of violence thus reveal the perpetrators as well as the mode of attack. This allows activism to condemn not only the victimizer but also the process of victimization that involves varying degrees of pain and humiliation based on the type of attack.

As a witness to the 1983 pogroms, Maali Almeida had pictures of “Sinhala men in sarong dancing” outside a burning shop, “naked Tamil boy being kicked to death” and “uniformed cops watching Tamil women being dragged out of buses” (Karunatilaka 2022, 108). In addition to being a truth-telling device, the viscosity of the suffering captured offers a commentary on the society in which those equipped with the task of upholding law and order, engage in activities contrary to their duties. It subtly condemns the complicity of such individuals who instead of stopping violence, create an environment conducive for it. Maali Almeida’s neutrality enables him to document both the 1985 Trincomalee Massacre of Tamils by the Sri Lankan military and the

1990 Batticaloa police station massacre, where over 600 Sinhala policemen were executed by the LTTE. Major Udugampola assigns him to capture only “Tiger atrocities,” despite state-perpetrated violence being equally rampant (Ibid, 251). The directive to photograph the activities of only one perpetrator while negating the other, indicates how personal biases and government tactics feed into the construction of history which is often understood as an objective and balanced documentation. Maali Almeida’s remark on how “state-sponsored slaughter rarely required photography,” hints at the diabolical use of state power to render sufferings of victims invisible and conveniently frame certain participating groups accountable for the brutality (Ibid). It also illuminates the risk of polarizing the ethnic communities and the mobilization of the discord to distort truth and thereby delay the possibility of justice and reparations for the victims.

At the Raja Gedara, also called “The King’s House” and “Palace,” Major Udugampola tells Maali Almeida, “Many who are discharged from the army, who have seen what you have, get emboldened into becoming activists. Into switching sides. Not a good idea” (Ibid, 255). Major Udugampola’s warning underscores how witnessing invariably engenders activism and the military’s draconian mechanisms to thwart any uprising against them. Maali Almeida sees masked men beating a boy, another strapped to a bed screaming, two boys hanging upside down, a shirtless man circling a naked girl, and a man in a surgical mask, whom the Major calls The Mask (Ibid, 256). These sights highlight the frailty of human lives in the hands of the perpetrator and the absolute disregard for dignity and ethics during interrogations. The body becomes the site of violence and the evidence of the pervasive control of the military. The Palace becomes an extreme space where all humanitarian laws are suspended. An extreme space can be defined as the space that entails, “unusual, bizarre and outrageous deeds and events - from torture to murder to cannibalism” (Nayar 2017, 11). The Palace is a spatial exemplification of the power of the state. It not only injects fear and terror into the social fabric but also serves as a stark reminder of the consequence of dissent. In 1987, Major Udugampola orders Maali Almeida to photograph JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera “alive and in custody” in the Palace, but three days after seeing him conversing with guards, Maali is asked to capture his “mutilated corpse” (Karunatilaka 2022, 304). The photograph, supplemented by Maali Almeida’s memory of the Palace, highlights the perverse decision of the military to silence opposing voices masqueraded as a

governmental necessity. As an implicated witness, he archives instances of state-sanctioned erasures that are instrumental in addressing the fissures in official historical records of the state.

When Maali Almeida crosses over to the afterlife, he enlists the help of other specters and his close confidante Jacqueline Vairavanathan to procure the collection of photographs that could expose the truth undeterred by the state's attempts at censoring history. According to Anna Reading (2023, 71), the embodied memory capital held within "the human or the more-than-human body" can be transformed into objectified memory capital through art, book or testimony. In the novel, the memory held by the implicated subject who transitions from the human to the more-than-human, is transformed into objectified memory through photographs. Through the memory labor of archivists, curators, and journalists, objectified memory is organized into institutional mnemonic capital (71). Clarantha Mel, curator at the Lionel Wendt Gallery, facilitates this transformation. Titled, "Law of the Jungle," the exhibition includes photographs of Minister Cyril at the 1983 riots and dead journalists whose arrests were denied by the government (Karunatilaka 2022, 308). Maali Almeida's witnessing of these events endows him with the power of resisting such erasures through reminding even when he loses his corporeality.

The photographs taken for Major Udugampola but never published are also displayed like "Captured Tiger grenades, rocket launchers, rifles, and boots," scared young soldiers huddled at the frontlines and mass cremation at Valvettithurai (Ibid, 303). The process of selection and omission that characterizes the narrativization of historical events, consolidates certain warring factions into positions of power and relegates others to positions of absolute powerlessness. Maali Almeida possessed highly confidential photographs like that of:

Father Jerome Balthazar, Anglican priest and human rights activist from Mannar, bound and gagged and dead in custody, though authorities claimed he had taken a boat to India. D.B. Pillai, Radio Ceylon journalist, shot in custody and dumped on the beach, for the crime of reporting accurate casualties in his weekly broadcast. The burning car filled with young Tamil corpses, taken for Raja Udugampola's private files, but kept for yours. (Karunatilaka 2022, 304)

To display that which was absent from the public gaze is an effort to reconstruct history. It is an act of resistance that allows the specter to transfer what has been witnessed into the public realm and thereby

becomes a resource for “re-imagining national collectives” (Assmann 2023, 1). The exhibition functions as a visual testimony challenging erasure and highlighting the diverse forms of violence. The photographs are not mere signifiers of a climate of political and ethnic turmoil but haunting remnants of the past. The concept of witnessing which has long been attributed to human subjects can also be applicable for more-than-human subjects like Maali Almeida, as the novel demonstrates. The specter as a reminder of the invisible, the erased or the obliterated instances of injustice, performs the function of reminding by transforming his memory capital into institutional mnemonic capital. Instead of orchestrating the public display of truth from exile, Maali Almeida congratulates himself for accomplishing the same from “beyond the grave” (Karunatilaka 2022, 304). Engaging in implicated memory activism from beyond the grave is in itself a disruption of life, a challenge to the very use of murder as a weapon to eliminate people who do not conform to the dominant ideologies.

Subversive power of remainders

The specter symbolizes an interruption in the general course of life and death, a pause that is enunciated more by its presence than its absence. The lack of assimilation into the dominant structures that emphasize on conformity, forces him to exist as a remainder, a remnant that is nevertheless powerful despite being an ‘other’ to the human. Instead of a ghost that returns, Maali Almeida is one that remains, albeit for a stipulated time period. Jessica Auchter (2023, 117) refers to ghosts as “disruptive memory activists” who “alter traditional, state-centric mechanisms of memory and memorialization.” The burden of witnessing compels the protagonist to use unconventional methods from beyond the limits of life to stage a protest against forgetting through photography. John Berger (2013, 121) states that the purpose of a photograph is to document social conditions and “move the conscientious public to action or protest.” However, as one would expect, his photographs do not lead to a revolution that ultimately transforms the war-torn Sri Lanka into an inclusive space where Sinhala and Tamils coexist harmoniously. Kugarajah steals “the 1983 photos, the IPKF killings and ten photos of dead Tamil villagers” (Karunatilaka 2022, 377). Jonny Gilhooley removes photos of the Major, the Colonel and Sudworth meeting, along with Maali’s private nude collection (Ibid, 378). Minister Cyril Wijeratne seizes photos of “dead journalists, kidnapped activists and beaten priests” along with

“exploded planes, dead villagers and rabid mobs” (Ibid, 379-380). The theft of the photos by those responsible for the attacks, implicated in the riots or associated with the perpetrators signals the threat memory activism poses to structures that hope to conceal the memory. Taking away the photos that hold certain individuals culpable does not diminish the power of memory activism. It only exemplifies the unease the confrontation with suppressed truth engenders. Moreover, it is a testament to the transformative potential of memory activism initiated by the specter.

The only photographs that remain are the ones that portray the country as a picturesque destination. The gaps in the Lionel Wendt Gallery, owing to the theft of the photographs, symbolize the notion of negative spaces. Writing in the context of memorial projects, James E. Young (2023, 156) states that one remembers absence by reproducing it. In the case of Maali Almeida’s photo exhibition, the juxtaposition of the remaining photographs with the gaps where photographs of the civil war had been placed, preserves their absence from history. It also suggests the persistence of unresolved pasts that warrant resolution, made more palpable by the haunting presence of the specter. It is through the efforts of Maali Almeida that the violence inflicted upon the civilians is articulated. His spectral presence embodies the lingering consequences of unresolved and traumatic instances that haunt the collective memory. The specter inherently possesses the resilience to be present, persist and perturb the forces which seek to negate the redressal of historical injustices. Thus, its ability to remain allows the specter to function as a symbol of resistance against historical erasure.

Conclusion

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida envisions the potential of memory to initiate reckoning and informed acknowledgement of historical injury. Eschewing the common stance of arguing for reparations in the aftermath of the war, the novel actively participates in the reconfiguration of narratives that refrain from providing an uncensored view of the past. It does not follow a didactic approach to remember the civil war. Rather, it opens up a space which celebrates absurdity and seeks pleasure in the unconventional methods of responding to atrocities. In addition to the protagonist’s pursuit of implicated memory activism, the novel becomes a pioneer of literary activism by blending fact and fiction, and history and memory. A hauntological

reading of the novel has laid bare the possibility of an implicated memory activism from beyond the grave, adding to the existing discourse on implication. The research has thus revealed the potential of creative ways of remembering to resist and strategically subvert fragmented and partial versions of history.

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