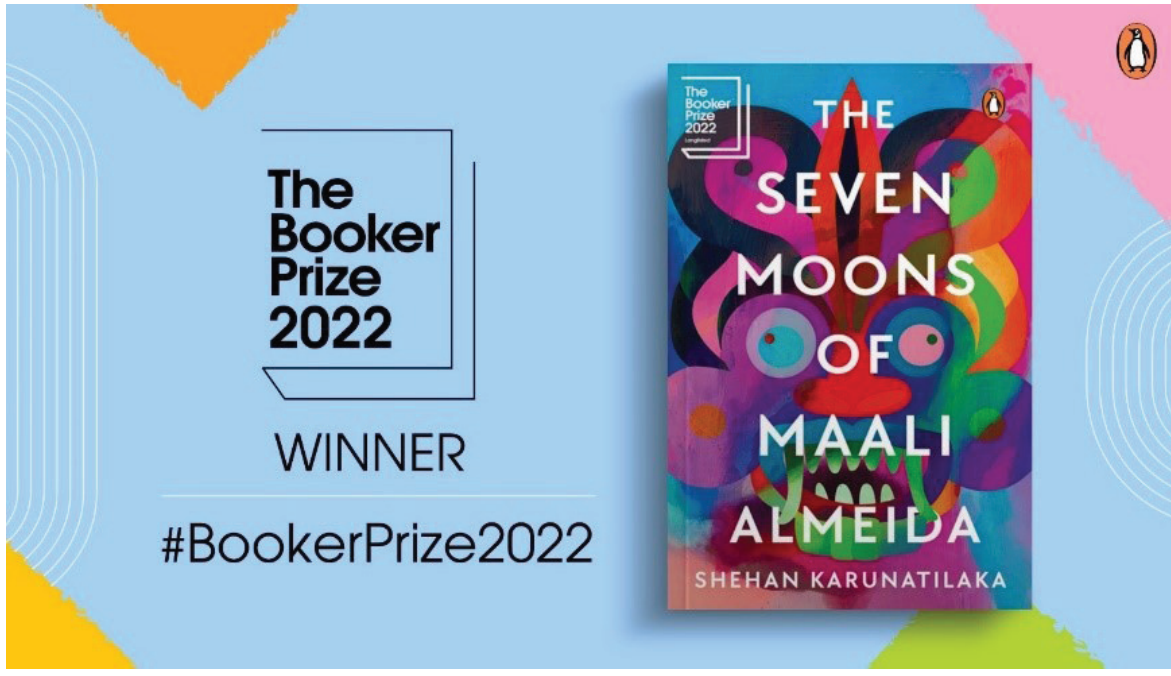
The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida. Shehan Karunatilaka. Gurugram, Harayana: Penguin Books, 2022

Harshana Rambukwella



A murdered journalist "awakens" in a ghostly world to witness his dead body being pulled out of a polluted Colombo lake to be dismembered and fed to animals. He suffers from amnesia and has "seven moons", or seven days, to solve the mystery of his murder before he must move on to another plane of existence. Woven around the basic structure of a classic whodunit, Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker-winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is a visceral foray into a surreal world of violence, impunity, and deferred and denied justice that moves through some of Sri Lanka's most troubled periods of recent history. Also known as Malinda Albert Kabalana, Maali Almeida's attempt to solve his murder becomes an extended metaphor for a country literally haunted by the spectral presence of thousands of victims seeking justice, atonement, and closure. The "seven moons" in the title refers to the Sinhala Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka where an almsgiving is held on the seventh day after death to invoke and pass on merit to the *aathma* (soul) of the dead person to aid birth in a better life. However, *Seven Moons* turns the temporal passage of this religio-cultural practice into a deeply unsettling journey into a place where the distance between the world of the dead and the world of the living has eroded. In his trademark style of sardonic humour, Karunatilaka builds this world as a ghostly dysfunctional bureaucracy – much like a Sri Lankan government department. As the narrator, Maali is also an irreverently humorous commentator on Sri Lankan

life, and the humour – like the thousands of comic memes that appeared on social media during the height of the political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka in 2022 – makes the suffering relatable and tolerable. Humour becomes the means through which a world of extreme violence and senselessness is rendered intelligible.

However, despite the humour – which Karunatilaka deploys with considerable skill – the book as a whole is a demanding read. Part of the text's unsettling effect comes from the fairly recent history that *Seven Moon* deals with. In his acceptance speech Karunatilaka observed that he did not write about more recent events, such as the 2009 conclusion of the war, because he found them too recent and possibly politically risky. However, the 1987-89 period that features in the book is a not-too-distant memory for Sri Lankans. This was the youth of many of today's middle-aged Sri Lankans, and the current predicament of the country and frequent invocations of *beeshanaya* (time of terror) are disturbing reminders of this violent past. The novel's proximity to "real life" adds to this uncanny effect and also raises difficult questions about the politics of representation.

The character of Maali Almeida draws heavily upon the iconic Richard de Soyza, a journalist and human rights activist who was widely believed to have been tortured and murdered by paramilitary forces close to the government in power at the time. Similarly, Dr. Ranee, who appears as part of the ghostly bureaucracy, is based on the Tamil human rights activist Dr. Rajini Thiranagama, who was murdered by the LTTE. Other characters, such as Sena (based on the student activist Daya Pathirana) and Major Raja Udugampola (based on the senior police officer Premadasa Udugampola, who was associated with extra-judicial violence and torture), are all figures who continue to haunt the public imagination. Their rendering in the novel has drawn criticism as well as admiration, particularly within Sri Lanka. Those who knew Richard de Soyza have found Maali's character – an expedient fixer and a gay playboy with few discernible values or principles – difficult to relate to, given de Soyza's iconic stature and reputation as a committed activist. Maali is obviously not Richard – one could argue that, as a photo-journalist, Maali is metonymic of the precarity of journalists in general in Sri Lanka – but the novel makes it difficult not to draw associations between Maali and the real-life Richard because the name Malinda Albert Kabalana is that of a character de Soyza played in the movie *Yuganthaya* in 1983.

However, while Richard de Soyza's depiction has attracted criticism, Narmada Thirangama, the younger daughter of Rajini Thiranagama, has publicly admired the depiction of her mother in *Seven Moons* (Thiranagama 2022). Thiranagama finds in the depiction of Dr. Ranee – an untiring and restless spirit attempting to organise the chaos of the afterlife and ensure a form of closure for other spirits – an empathetic and authentic portrayal of the essence of who her mother was. These starkly different responses to Richard de Soyza and Rajini Thiranagama also relate to a larger politics of representation that the book almost inevitably participates in. While the international reception of *Seven Moons* has been largely positive, its reception within Sri Lanka has been somewhat muted and critical.

This differential reception of the book is informed by a familiar dilemma for writing in English from former colonies. The medium of expression, English, marks such writing as "privileged" and its depiction of the "local" as being packaged for global consumption. Several Sri Lankan reviews of the book (Hoole 2022; Bandara 2023) have critiqued it on the basis that it gets the local "wrong", ranging from its depiction of queer culture in Colombo to the ways in which it distorts local phrases and cultural references at times or flattens out the differences between the LTTE, the Indian Peace Keeping Force, and the JVP. The complex political economy of the violence deployed by these different actors, and the ideological motivation behind such violence, become erased in statements such as "the government forces, the eastern separatists, the southern anarchists and the northern peacekeepers are all prolific producers of corpses" (18). Karunatilaka has also mentioned in interviews that the first iteration of this book, titled *Chats with the Dead*, had to be substantially reworked for Western audiences because the mythologising and historical context in *Chats with the Dead* was potentially too dense and impenetrable for them. However, it is this "translation" of the local context into what Judith Butler might call a "frame of reference" (Butler 2009) recognised globally that generates the criticism of a kind of orientalist slant in the text and of packaging Sri Lanka's violent history for global consumption.

However, while agreeing that some of the text's depictions do easily play into "Western" stereotypes of the postcolonial Global South, I believe such criticism also misses the performativity and playfulness of the text. *Seven Moons* is not social or political history, and to judge it by a perceived standard of verisimilitude expected of other genres of writing is somewhat problematic. While it renders the pathos of Sri Lanka's tragic histories of violence palpable, it is the humour of the text that allows for a critical appraisal of these

histories which resists sentimental romanticisation. One way in which the novel achieves this is by questioning binaries between victims and perpetrators and instead foregrounding what we might call "implication". In the purgatory-like world in which Maali finds himself, victims and perpetrators occupy a single space. This leads to unsettling moments where the victim-perpetrator division on which most notions of justice and accountability are based on becomes eroded. For instance, Maali is confronted by the spirit of a woman who was torched to death during the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. She recognises and confronts Maali and says he is like the "minister" – presumably a Sinhala politician involved in the violence – who "watched" her burn alive. Maali then confesses to himself (and the reader) that he sold this photograph to *Newsweek*, though the magazine never published it. This incident is a moment of "implication" in the novel, where Maali – though never a direct participant in the violence, and himself a victim of violence – is nonetheless implicated in the suffering of others. By pushing the world of the living and the dead together, along with victims and perpetrators, I believe the novel is suggesting that such implication is almost inevitable in contexts with deep genealogies of violence. In Sri Lanka the Sinhala community, for instance, has benefitted from the majoritarian nature of the State, and even those who have never directly participated in violence against minorities are implicated in its institutional and structural violence. Karunatilaka's unusual choice of narrative perspective, the second person "you" – which at one level is suggestive of the out-of-body experience of a spirit – also reinforces implication, because at times the text gives the uncanny feeling that it is addressing "you" the reader, and you are thereby drawn into its tumultuous world.

Seven Moons as a whole also undermines generic conventions. Though styled as a classic whodunit which holds the promise of a grand revelation, the story never really fulfills this promise. Throughout the novel there is a search for an elusive set of photographs which are key to resolving Maali's murder and, if found, would also prove politically explosive. But the novel does not deliver in this respect, and therefore readerly expectations are deferred – like the justice that the text's many victims so desperately search for. I believe this narrative denouement – and Maali's own flawed anti-heroic character – can be read as a somewhat cynical disavowal of redemptive possibilities in a crisis-stricken society like Sri Lanka. At the same time, the novel does allow Maali a form of redemption, and some of the victims also achieve a kind of vengeful justice. Qadri Ismail, the well-known Sri Lankan literary scholar, once observed that there are narratives that objectify Sri Lanka as a place and others that "abide" by it (2005). I believe *Seven Moons* – while easily open to the criticism that it orientalises, objectifies, and exoticises a conflict-defined Sri Lanka – nevertheless abides by the place and its victims. It is a text that is involved in the politics of place and offers a form of vicarious redemption and justice that may not yet be available to Sri Lanka's many suffering peoples. In his acceptance speech at the Booker, Karunatilaka stated that he wishes for the day when the surreal events of his fiction are confined to the fictional world. The predicament this book confronts is that the world it depicts is one in which hope and redemption are elusive and it cannot but help to reproduce this sense of disillusionment. But this then is not a failure of the text per se, but a larger failure in the social and political possibilities of many postcolonial societies in the Global South.

Harshana Rambukwella *is Visiting Professor, Arts and Humanities at NYU Abu-Dhabi.*

References

Bandara, Dhanuka. (2023). "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida: a Failed Novel about a Failed People." *The Island* (1 January). Available at https://island.lk/the-seven-moons-of-maali-almeida-a-failed-novel-about-a-failed-people/

Butler, Judith. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London: Verso.

Hoole, Ratnajeevan S. (2022). "A Contrarian Review: The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida." *The Colombo Telegraph* (15 November). Available at https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/a-contrarian-review-the-seven-moons-of-maali-almeida/

Ismail, Qadri. (2005). *Abiding by Sri Lanka: On Peace, Place, and Postcoloniality.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Thirangama, Narmada. (2022). "My mother, the fearless leader." *The Hindu* (18 November). Available at https://www.thehindu.com/books/rajani-thiranagama-human-rights-activist-sri-lanka-civil-war-tamil-tigers-assassination-shehan-karunatilaka-the-seven-moons-of-maali-almeida-booker-prize-narmada-thiranagama/article66143348.ece