

CYCLE OF VIOLENCE, NARRATIVE CONTROL, AND MARGINALISATION: A STUDY
OF POSTCOLONIAL NATIONALISM IN SHEHAN KARUNATILAKA'S *THE SEVEN*
MOONS OF MAALI ALMEIDA

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Abstract

In current times when violence against minorities is on the rise worldwide, there is an urgent need for literary engagement with the nationalist sentiments that promote such oppression, historical distortion and systemic marginalisation of different communities. Shehan Karunatilaka's novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* serves as an essential text in this regard, bringing the realities of state-endorsed violence and historical manipulation in postcolonial Sri Lanka to light. Although existing scholarly literature acknowledges aspects related to postcolonial nationalism, Civil War, and anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka, there is limited exploration of authors like Karunatilaka and their role in constructing counter-discourses that resist hegemonic nationalist frameworks. This study aims to address the gap in literary studies by examining the correlation of violence with nationalism in the postcolonial period, the role of biased interpretation of historical narratives in constructing nationalist ideals, and the systemic marginalisation resulting from nationalist discourses portrayed in the novel. Using a qualitative approach, this research implies that postcolonial nationalism in its current state relies on the preservation of colonial violence, subjective portrayal of history, and exclusion of minorities.

Keywords: Postcolonial nationalism, Sri Lanka, civil war, minority oppression, anti-Tamil violence, history, marginalisation.

Dedication

To every single community around the world suffering from the consequences of ethnonationalism, the Tamils of Sri Lanka, the Rohingyas of Myanmar, the Palestinians of Gaza, and countless others; my heart goes out to you all. I dedicate this work to you, and hope it can contribute to the collective voice of resistance against all forms of oppression.

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During my undergrad, there once came a time when I felt confused and conflicted about my place in the ENH department. Till I found a teacher who inspired me to such an extent, I no longer had any doubts about whether I belonged here. Therefore, I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Abu Sayeed Mohammad Noman, for his guidance not only during the months of working on this thesis, but throughout my entire undergraduate journey, helping me find my way back to my passion again. I am also grateful to all the faculties in my department, whose wisdom and guidance helped me grow so much in the last 4 years.

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List of Acronyms

NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
CNTR	Canada Norway Third World Relief
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
UNP	United National Party
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
FP	Federal Party
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
STF	Special Task Force

Introduction

The 2022 Man Booker-winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka navigates the war-torn history, violent state politics, and corrupt power structure of Sri Lanka in the 1980s through the perspective of the wandering soul of a deceased photographer. The novel's protagonist is Malinda Albert Kabalana, going by the name Maali Almeida. He is murdered and has "seven moons" left to reach "The Light," the liminal space between the real world and the afterlife. Meanwhile, he tries to discover the mystery behind his death. In his lifetime, Maali worked as a photographer during the Sri Lankan Civil War. He captured unsettling images containing scenes of mass killings, bombing aftermaths, mutilated bodies, mob violence, etc. He supplied his photos to the different factions involved in the war. The Sri Lankan army, the British Embassy, and the Tamil NGO CNTR¹ were his clients, who used his photos to produce narratives that served their different self-interests. Maali himself refrained from identifying with any side of the war. However, after his death, he dedicated his limited time in the "In Between" (the place between the real world and the afterlife) to make them public. He claims they are "photos that will bring down governments. Photos that could stop wars" (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 6). By publishing the pictures he kept hidden during his lifetime, Maali wished to end the war by exposing the reality of violence and abuse of power by the government and its forces, along with the atrocities of the other factions of the war, such as the JVP, the LTTE, etc. He believes that the events captured through his photos can serve as a voice of truth against the manipulated and constructed narrative by the country's authorities and evoke compassion worldwide for his countrymen's sufferings, putting an end to the devastating Civil War. Maali is shown to contribute to his nation's well-being epistemologically: by ensuring

¹ A fictional NGO in the novel that claims to be dedicated to generating funding for the support of the Sri Lankan Tamil population, however, later revealed to be a front for the LTTE.

representation of peoples' sufferings, and contributing to the discourse advocating for truth and humanity through his photographs. Therefore, through his protagonist's actions and philosophy, the author Shehan Karunatilaka takes a stance against violence and speaks against the human suffering that occurs as a consequence of war.

Along with Maali's personal ambitions, the novel also describes his experiences during his lifetime and his adventures in the afterlife. Doing so, the author Shehan Karunatilaka blends facts with fiction and sheds light on the violent reality of the war-torn state of Sri Lanka in the 1980s. The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) was an armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil separatist militant group LTTE. The war was primarily a consequence of the ethnic tensions between the nation's Sinhalese majority and the largest minority, the Sri Lankan Tamils. At that time, the nation also struggled with corrupt and totalitarian governments, widespread political violence, economic instability, attempts at insurgency, and foreign interventions. The communal conflicts and socio-political instability at that time revealed not only the failure of the nation's administrative structures, but also an overall lack of national unity within its ethnic and religious communities. Despite the island's different communities' long history of peaceful coexistence, Tamil-Sinhalese disputes in particular began in the colonial era and persisted long after Sri Lanka's independence, leading the nation to a devastating Civil War. By observing the deterioration in the relationship among the communal groups in Sri Lanka, especially in the context of colonialism, this research aims to analyse the nature of postcolonial nationalism that emerged on the island.

Colonialism is undoubtedly an irreversible experience for any community. The postcolonial nation comes into existence as the colonial rulers mark the territories of the country before they leave. As a result, the newly formed nation struggles to find an identity unique and

separate from its previous colonial self, since its only understanding of a modern nation-state comes from its colonisers. At the same time, the nation's authorities also inherit the colonial framework that functions through violence and oppression. As a result, the nature of nationalism developed in a postcolonial state is not authentic to itself, but as exclusionary as its colonial predecessors. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines nation and nationalism; Eric J. Hobsbawm builds upon his definition; while Partha Chatterjee puts his ideas in the context of a postcolonial nation. By consulting their ideas, this research aims to understand the elements of postcolonial nationalism in particular and its application to Sri Lanka. Furthermore, borrowing inspiration from the works of Frantz Fanon, this thesis determines that the nature of postcolonial nationalism as it is practised is inherently violent, favours the majority's ethnoreligious identity, and relies on the manipulation of historical facts. To address this claim, this paper studies the colonial roots of ethnic violence and discrimination in Sri Lanka's history and the emergence of Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony in the country as a consequence. The active preservation of discriminatory practices in the nation's political scene through the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist ideals under the pretence of Sri Lankan nationalism fuels mutual hatred among the nation's communities and contributes to the continuation of an endless cycle of violence, which the novel identifies as the cause of the Civil War.

This research also studies the development of postcolonial nationalist ideologies. It observes the role of history, more specifically, the interpretation of ancient myths to promote ethnoreligious nationalism in postcolonial countries, consulting Michel Foucault's ideas. The research establishes that oppression against a community is not limited to physical violence, but is also epistemological and rooted in discursive practices. Ancient myths and renowned historical texts (such as the *Mahavamsa*) are used to develop discourses that create ethnoreligious

nationalist sentiments among the masses of a postcolonial nation. Karunatilaka's criticism of the myths and ancient texts used to derive legitimacy for Sinhalese supremacy in the mainstream historical narrative strengthens the argument of the thesis. This research further observes that such subjective interpretations of historical narratives can be extremely dangerous. When perceived as the objective truth, they can be weaponised in a way that threatens the well-being of the nation's minorities. As seen in the case of Sri Lanka, discrimination against minorities is not only reflected in state policies but also evident in the majority Sinhalese population's active participation in hate crimes against the Tamils. The Sinhalese are so violent toward minorities because they derive their identity from the subjective interpretations of their sacred texts, and wish to uphold that perceived sense of supremacy.

By analysing the novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, this thesis not only identifies Sri Lanka's nationalism crisis but also aims to derive a solution. In his novel, Karunatilaka promotes a more constructive approach to nationalism, which is more inclusive and capable of representing the nation's entire population. For that purpose, the author argues for the necessity of an epistemological method to prevent the fostering of mutual hatred and violence within the communities. This objective can be achieved through an authentic representation of history that includes the voices of the oppressed. This research observes the author's use of magic-realist elements to represent the marginalised people silenced by violence and systemic oppression, drawing on the works of Gayatri Spivak related to subaltern studies. In *The Seven Moons*, the subaltern is portrayed through the ghosts of people who died from political violence, whose voices are silenced in the real world. Maali's narrative provides a direct account of the victims, and his character also fights to make their suffering known by attempting to publish his photographs. This thesis shows through the novel how Karunatilaka attempts to provide a space

for the silent victims of the war in his effort to bring change to the existing discursive practices that give rise to non-inclusive nationalist ideologies.

Although a large number of scholarly works exist on the nature of postcolonial nationalism, state-endorsed violence, and the position of minorities in Sri Lanka in the context of the Civil War, there is limited research on the works of Sri Lankan novelists like Shehan Karunatilaka from a postcolonial nationalist perspective and their role in creating a counter-discourse that challenges how history is perceived. Their approach to these matters provides a valuable literary representation that contributes to creating an essential counter-narrative against the biased telling of history, which is a common tendency of nationalist politics in postcolonial countries. Through analysing the key aspects of the novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, this study advocates for the representation of these issues in literature in particular. It supports Karunatilaka's claim (portrayed through Maali) that to bring meaningful change to a society struggling with conflicting nationalist ideologies like Sri Lanka, it is essential to understand the causes and effects of nationalism in postcolonial states and develop a counter-discourse against its oppressive historical narratives, which can only be done through representations of truth from a perspective that has been silenced. As the photographs of Maali that portray the real horrors of the Sri Lankan Civil War—as Karunatilaka's novel criticises the violence and speaks on behalf of the victims of the war—this research will also add to contemporary postcolonial literary studies by highlighting the contribution of novels like *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, and their role in creating a counter-discourse opposing the state-endorsed, exclusionary nature of postcolonial nationalism. Although this study will remain focused on Sri Lanka, any state facing similar internal struggles can resonate with the issues

discussed. This research aims to promote an inclusive and authentic approach to history and to inspire communities across the world resisting oppression even today.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of the nature and role of postcolonial nationalism in the civil conflict of Sri Lanka in the context of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by answering the following research questions:

1. Does the violent legacy of colonialism play a role in shaping the exclusionary nature of nationalism in postcolonial countries? If so, in what ways does it manifest in civil conflicts within newly independent states?
2. How do subjective interpretations of ancient myths and historical texts contribute to the construction of the non-inclusive nationalism emerging in postcolonial states? How does Karunatilaka convey these aspects in his novel?
3. What are the constructive and inclusive approaches that can be developed to address the conflicts caused by postcolonial nationalism? In this context, what is Karunatilaka's stance on addressing the Civil War in Sri Lanka?

Literature Review

To answer these questions, this research looks into the existing scholarly works on the novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Although studies directly engaging with the novel's observation of nationalism in Sri Lanka are limited, the available scholarly literature greatly benefits this thesis by covering concepts that help this study develop answers to its research questions. Their critical analysis of the novel's portrayal of ethnic violence, human rights violations, myths, magic realism, historical narrative construction, etc., is integral to understanding Sri Lanka's nationalist project. The existing studies on the novel provide essential ideas to this research in understanding Karunatilaka's critique and reimagination of nationalism in Sri Lanka.

Kuriakose and Kumar's (2023) analysis of the violence represented in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* relies on the perspectives of Hannah Arendt and Arjun Appadurai regarding social and political violence. The essay studies the harrowing portrayal of historical events explored in the novel, such as the Anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983, the Manal Aru massacre (1984), the Akkaraipattu massacre (1986), the Jaffna Hospital massacre (1987), and the 1990 massacre of Sri Lankan Police officers. Kuriakose and Kumar's objective is to explore the factors that contribute to the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. Their findings highlight the root of violence during the Sri Lankan Civil War in political power abuse, dehumanisation, and ethnocentrism. According to Arendt, violence is an expression of political power, motivated by the desire to dominate (2). Appadurai, on the other hand, discusses how the fear and anxiety within marginalised minority groups can incite violence. The existence of minorities in a hegemonic state also causes the dominant community to feel threatened and react violently (3). Kuriakose and Kumar's essay also studies the photographs captured by Maali that portray the haunting

consequences of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflicts. Their analysis provides valuable insight for this research by shedding light on the causes and nature of violence in Sri Lanka, which this thesis builds upon from a nationalist perspective.

Similarly, the article “Human Rights and Literature: A Study of The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida” by Sharma & Tripathi (2023) studies the novel’s portrayal of human rights violations through its discussion of ethnic violence against minorities and identifies the novel as a significant work of Human Rights Literature (HRL). It explores how the narrative employs symbolic representations such as ghosts, mythical and historical figures to convey the horrors of war, including abductions and massacres, particularly against Tamil minorities. The study highlights the novel's function as a cultural medium that transcends traditional legal and political discourse. The research also studies how cultural and linguistic discursive practices contribute to the dehumanisation of oppressed minorities, justifying genocide. It portrays how these aspects are translated into the language of fiction and the role it plays in the movements protecting human rights. Sharma and Tripathi’s approach aligns with the objective of this thesis, which is to speak on behalf of the human rights of Sri Lanka’s ethnic minorities by discussing their struggles throughout the Civil War as portrayed in the novel. Both this research and Sharma and Tripathi’s article aim to take an alternative approach to historical studies by highlighting the sufferings of communities that are overlooked, dehumanised, and silenced in traditional discourse.

In the context of historical discourse, the dissertation “Representation of the Sri Lankan Civil War in Shehan Karunatilaka's The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida” by Rai (2023) also examines the source of conflicts between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities by consulting Michel Foucault's theories in *Truth, Power, and Knowledge*, and Paul Hamilton’s theory of New Historicism. By doing so, the study reveals how the Sri Lankan government perpetuates a false

narrative to marginalise its Tamil citizens. Both Foucault and Hamilton's theories claim that historical texts are not necessarily objective facts but rather are intertwined with the contextual circumstances of their time, society, and the author's disposition. Foucault claims that power is inseparable from ideology. What we come to know as historical facts is rather a portrayal of ideological truths imposed by the authority in power. Power originates from multiple sources and practices, including discourse, hidden narratives, and social rules, which contribute to shaping our understanding of truth and knowledge. Sivapriya et al. (2024) also echo this sentiment through their view of the novel's protagonist's journey from a post-truth perspective. According to their research, due to the prevalence of state-imposed false narratives, propaganda, misinformation, and media manipulation, current society has entered an era of post-truth, where subjective interpretation and emotional appeals shape public perception of historical events. Facts are no longer objective; rather, they are constructed by the existing networks of human and non-human participants (69). In this era, factual evidence becomes overshadowed by opinions and emotions. Therefore, political enterprises develop propaganda to fulfil their agendas by emotionally appealing to their audience. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* "adeptly illustrates the pervasive influence of post-truth dynamics, where the delineation between truth and falsehood is obfuscated by subjective narratives and manipulative discourse" (70). Sivapriya et al.'s research examines the portrayal of political corruption, narrative manipulation, and the disparity between factual truth and politically-driven propaganda in the novel. This thesis, too, relies on a framework similar to Rai (2023) and Sivapriya et al. (2024) to determine the sources of the Sinhalese nationalist rhetoric presented as objective truth in the mainstream historical discourse in Sri Lanka and how it contributes to the ethnic tension that led to the Civil War.

Karunatilaka's use of magic realism is also a widely discussed aspect in the scholarly works on this novel. Shaheen et al. (2023) explore the novel's portrayal of the Sri Lankan Civil War through magic realist elements, highlighting the brutalities and human rights violations perpetrated by various national and international factions. The dead photographer Maali serves as a witness to the atrocities committed by each stakeholder in the war due to his ambiguous political identity. Maali himself is also a victim of extrajudicial killing and forced disappearance by the government. The magic realist nature of the novel allows Maali to observe the human rights violations of different factions even after his death. The factions of the war include internal forces such as the Sri Lankan government, the military, as well as political and militant powers like the LTTE and the JVP; NGOs like the CNTR putting up a front for the LTTE; foreign forces like the Associated Press operating under the British embassy, the IPKF, etc. In the novel, we see that despite their apparent conflicts, the opposing sects of the war often collaborate to fulfil their own agendas. Moreover, Shaheen et al.'s research also explores how each faction of the war commits human rights violations despite its claims to establish social justice, through the novel's portrayal of terrorism in the guise of NGO activities and the JVP's agenda of violence and anarchy conveyed through the dead activist Sena Pathirana. Furthermore, the novel mentions the Indian intervention in Sri Lankan politics through the IPKF, and the role of neocolonial powers like the USA, UK, and Israel in selling weapons to the Sri Lankan government and encouraging the continuation of war and genocide. Shaheen et al. (2023) contribute to this research by addressing the state-endorsed violence of governments and by showing how in the postcolonial era, independent developing nations continue to be controlled by international forces due to the innate corruption of their authorities. Their observations align with this study's claim regarding

the persistence of colonial practices in modern times through violence and control exerted by the postcolonial government as well as foreign powers.

Saha & Sarbadhikary (2024) in “Myth, Mystery, and Murder: Trauma and Resistance in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*” observe the use of mythical and magic realist elements as a form of resistance against the violence and injustice of the Sri Lankan Civil War. The characters of ghosts, spirits, and demons in the text explore the collective trauma experienced by the nation during the war. Moreover, their work studies the portrayal of national identity in this novel. From a functionalist perspective, myths have an important role in forming national identity. However, the myths also reinforce and sustain the idea of a distinction between the “national self” and the “national other” based on ethnic, religious, class, caste, and sexual identities (6), a concept also explored by this thesis to analyse the development of nationalist sentiments based on ethnic division in Sri Lanka. Saha & Sarbadhikary’s research also studies the protagonist Maali’s character. His identity is ambiguous in every sense; he is an atheist, a homosexual, and has mixed ethnic ancestry, which puts him in a grey area between the ethnic binary enforced by Sri Lanka’s nationalist ideals. Through Maali’s ambiguity, the study conveys how the novel advocates for a national identity that transcends the distinction imposed by the national myths. Saha & Sarbadhikary also discuss the impact of violence on memory and identity. “[...] the text thus underscores the individual variability of traumatic memory and challenges the assumption that trauma invariably leads to verbal incapacitation and amnesia, suggesting instead a nuanced spectrum of memory recall capabilities among trauma survivors” (12). Maali’s struggle with memory and identity symbolises the nation’s collective struggle to find its identity, caused by state-imposed division and otherisation. Their work inspires this research to explore how nationalist interpretations of myths often otherise minority communities and reinforce narratives

that propagate violence. This thesis aims to portray how the Sinhalese hegemony is a product of the colonial legacy integrated into the collective psyche and systemic narrative of the nation.

Methodology

This thesis relies on a qualitative approach to develop its findings from a variety of primary and secondary sources. The primary data used to answer the research questions are derived from Shehan Karunatilaka's 2022 novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. This study also develops its definition of postcolonial nationalism from various secondary sources, such as the works of renowned scholars like Benedict Anderson, Eric J. Hobsbawm, and Partha Chatterjee. To provide historical context for the emergence of Sinhalese-dominated nationalism in postcolonial Sri Lanka and to contextualise its arguments, this research will also study the colonial history and significant historical events before the Civil War, considering the works of K.M. De Silva, Nira Wickramasinghe, Neil DeVotta, Steven Kemper and many other relevant authors. Moreover, the study will rely on theoretical frameworks developed by prominent postcolonial scholars. It will consult the works of Frantz Fanon regarding the colonial legacy of violence in postcolonial nations. Furthermore, this research will also incorporate Michael Foucault's theories to provide insight into the correlation between power and knowledge and the role of historical interpretation in the development of nationalism. In the context of the novel's use of magic realism to represent the victims of the war, this research will also incorporate Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theories to analyse how Karunatilaka provides a voice to Sri Lanka's marginalised communities and their struggles to express themselves under an oppressive discursive framework.

Chapter 1 Nationalism in Postcolonial Sri Lanka: Formation and Development

The development and formation of postcolonial nationalism in Sri Lanka is fundamentally rooted in the legacies of colonial rule, which relied on propagating division among the country's communities. Sri Lanka, previously known as Ceylon, gained independence in the aftermath of British withdrawal in 1948. Prior to that, the island's critical geographical position as a global trade centre, along with its production of the valuable spice cinnamon, attracted colonisers one after another. The colonial history of Sri Lanka consists of Portuguese rule (1505–1658), Dutch rule (1658–1796), and British rule (1796–1948). According to Karunatilaka, the colonial period in Sri Lanka is a long history of violence, exploitation, and degradation: “The Portuguese assumed the missionary position. The Dutch took us from behind. By the time the Brits came along, we were already on our knees, with our hands behind our backs and our mouths open” (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 221). Although the island was colonised by different countries over time and each coloniser had different methods of control, the people suffered all the same. He considers the possibility of the colonials being responsible for the war-torn, chaotic state of the country, while also acknowledging the involvement of the neo-colonial “superpowers.” In the context of *The Seven Moons*, this research aims to show that the structures of division and discrimination fostered under colonial rule continue to shape the internal conflicts of the island.

Sri Lanka has been home to a large number of communities, with varying ethnic, religious, and linguistic origins since ancient times². Considering the island's history

² According to the 2012 Population and Housing Census carried out by the Department of Census and Statistics, Sinhalese make up the majority (74.9%) of the ethnic group in Sri Lanka, while Sri Lankan Tamils are the largest

pre-colonialism, the ideal congruence of race, language, religion, and political territory assumed in nationalist discourse was not as starkly differentiated as we see in the modern era (Nissan and Stirrat 22). The various identities lived harmoniously; however, throughout the country's colonial history, examples of conflict among the different ethnicities, religions, and national ideologies can be found, often incited by the rulers. These conflicts prevented an inclusive sense of nationhood from being fostered in the nation, as its collective identity started to develop based on ethnic majoritarianism, particularly through the privileging of Sinhala-Buddhist identity as the foundation of the nation. The rise of Sinhalese nationalism³, leading to systemic discrimination, disenfranchisement, and cultural erasure, created dissatisfaction among the Sri Lankan Tamils, encouraging the conditions for ethnic hostility. Inevitably, we see the emergence of Tamil separatist sentiments and militant organisations like the LTTE as a consequence. The growing conflicts between the Sinhalese and the Tamils soon escalated into the nearly 30-year-long Sri Lankan civil war, which claimed the lives of an estimated 80,000–100,000 people—approximately 0.5% of the country's total population (Dower et al. 3). This research argues that the seeds of dispute among ethnic communities in Sri Lanka were sown in the nation's long colonial history, through discrimination and favouritism that benefitted its colonial rulers.

Thus, while nationalism in postcolonial Sri Lanka was intended as a force of unity and liberation, its development and formation ultimately became one of the central factors driving the

minority (11.2%). The nation's demographic also includes Sri Lankan Moors (9.3%), Indian Tamils (4.1%), and other smaller groups (1.5%) such as Burghers, Malays, Chetties, Bharathas, etc. ("Composition of Population of Sri Lanka").

³ It is important to note that the term "Sinhalese nationalism" in this essay primarily refers to the Kandyan Sinhalese community following Theravada Buddhism who comprise the majority of the island's population and emerged as a hegemonic force in independent Sri Lanka in the context of the civil war.

civil war. By consulting ideas from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Eric J. Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Partha Chatterjee's "Whose Imagined Communities", and Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, this thesis will discuss the democratic postcolonial state's construction of nationalism driven by populism, and its role in reproducing colonial structures of violence and discrimination. This paper draws attention to the Sinhalese nationalist sentiments emerging in independent Sri Lanka as a consequence of colonialism. It also studies the nature of colonial violence as portrayed in Fanon's work, how it is recreated in the Sri Lankan state in the form of a civil war and how Karunatilaka addresses these ideas in his novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*.

1.1. Myth of Nationalism in Former Colonies: The Case of Ceylon

To address the question of nationalism in Sri Lanka, it is essential to first determine the meaning of a "nation" and analyse the development process of the idea of "nationalism". According to Benedict Anderson, a nation is an imagined political community, which is both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson 6). In the post-Enlightenment era, a nation-based identity emerged as a new mode of comradeship for the masses, separate from pre-existing sociological conditions like language or ethnicity, replacing the influence of religion and dynastic rule despite the existing inequalities within the territory's population. Eric J. Hobsbawm expands further on the nation-building process by identifying the foundations of the argument of nationalism and the phases that mark the development of a nation. He claims that definitions of a nation based on political or socio-cultural grounds fall short, as the constructed notion of nationalism—or a community's desire to identify itself with a particular nationality—often precedes the physical entity of a nation (Hobsbawm 8). In the nation-building process, Anderson emphasises the role of "print-capitalism", the institutions that shape the imagined community.

These include newspapers, books, and novels written in vernacular languages that create shared experiences and promote a unified sense of self within the anonymous members of the community. Hobsbawm, however, believes that the process of acquiring a sense of nationalism is more expansive and includes multiple factors. Firstly, in the preliminary phase, the masses acquire a sense of their identity based on cultural or folkloric grounds, with no national or political implications. Afterwards, this vague sense of identity is further accelerated towards a definite direction by “a body of pioneers and militants of ‘the national idea’” through the initiation of political campaigning (12). And finally, nationalist movements begin to garner support from the masses—or a portion of the masses they claim to represent, which may occur prior to or following the establishment of the state. However, in “Whose Imagined Community?” Chatterjee criticises the Eurocentric nature of Anderson’s definition of nationalism. Following the European nationalist framework, non-European nations have to choose their imagined community from the already available “modular forms” (Chatterjee 5), without considering their socio-cultural nuances and, especially in cases of former colonies, their history of colonialism. Chatterjee believes that anticolonialism precedes political nationalism and allows a colonised nation to develop its own sphere of sovereignty before politically resisting imperial power (6). This echoes Hobsbawm’s statement that the consciousness of a national identity exists before the nation-state itself and functions as the foundation of a potential nation. Colonised societies develop their sovereign spaces through two types of social institutions: the “outer” sphere, which includes political and economic institutions dominated by the colonial state over which the colonised had limited control, and the “inner” sphere, which contains the foundation of their cultural identity, viewed as a form of resistance against Western influence and crucial for maintaining the nation's unique character. According to Chatterjee, anticolonial nationalism first

formed within this inner sphere by redefining and preserving their cultural identity, and only later moved to challenge colonial power in the outer sphere. This formation of cultural nationalism through interactions with foreign forces is overlooked by the Western framework.

However, the problem with depending on criteria like language, ethnicity, or historical past to define a nation is that these concepts are not definite, but rather “fuzzy, shifting and ambiguous” (Hobsbawm 6). Therefore, any nationalism developed on such grounds is likely to become unsuccessful. Considering Chatterjee’s analysis, it can be observed that nationalism in former colonies develops against a common opposition: the colonisers. The colonised masses derive their identity from their desire to be emancipated from colonial control by viewing their rulers as the nation’s common enemy and, therefore, attempt to preserve their sense of self through their inner sphere. In this way, nationalism’s initial purpose in such countries is to be an instrument for emancipation. However, once the colonisers leave, nationalist ideals lose their sense of direction and become a destabilising force. As Chatterjee explains, “By the 1970s, nationalism had become a matter of ethnic politics, the reason why people in the Third World killed each other—sometimes in wars between regular armies, sometimes, more distressingly, in cruel and often protracted civil wars, and increasingly, it seemed, by technologically sophisticated and virtually unstoppable acts of terrorism” (Chatterjee 3). In the postcolonial era, leaders who once freed their people through anti-colonial struggles often became corrupt, brutal, and populist dictators. This is because postcolonial nations derive their identity from a Western framework that was not developed with the reality of former colonies in mind. As a result, these countries struggle to develop a nationalism that resonates with them. Instead of turning postcolonial nationalism into a caricature of Western nationalist philosophies, Chatterjee argues in favour of developing alternative frameworks for understanding modernity and nationalism that

take into account the perspectives and experiences of the colonised world. “Here lies the root of our postcolonial misery: not in our inability to think out new forms of the modern community but in our surrender to the old forms of the modern state. If the nation is an imagined community and if nations must also take the form of states, then our theoretical language must allow us to talk about community and state at the same time. I do not think our present theoretical language allows us to do this” (11).

According to Chatterjee, nations are, indeed, imagined communities, and they are imagined on the basis of cultural, linguistic, and religious identity in postcolonial nations. However, since they are established on such vague criteria, this also creates a sense of difference among the various identities internal to the nation, especially within multicultural societies like Sri Lanka. This gives rise to ethnic conflicts and fascist governments that rely on fueling these differences to a violent degree. To establish his point, Eric J. Hobsbawm also addresses the Tamil-Sinhalese nationalist conflict in Sri Lanka in his work (6). Considering Sri Lanka’s history as an independent nation, it becomes clear that it failed to provide its people with a singular, unified national identity. “In the years of crisis, there has been no overarching image of Sri Lankan national identity to hold Tamil sentiment back from the path to separatism; the only images available link the nation to one group, the Sinhala people, and one religion, Buddhism” (Spencer 9). As a result, nationalism does not work in Sri Lanka. Its people cannot imagine themselves as part of a singular nation-state; rather, they derive their identity from their ethnic or religious selves. The majority aims to establish an all-consuming cultural hegemony, while the minorities feel marginalised and prioritise preserving their traditional identities instead of a national one.

1.2. “Divide and Conquer”: Colonial Ruling Policies

Although Sri Lankan nationalism in its current state is flawed and struggling, it does not imply that Sri Lanka is incapable of existing peacefully as a nation. The island of Ceylon never had a single unified identity and consisted of three independent kingdoms before the arrival of Europeans. Yet, as this thesis has previously addressed, the country's various communities—the Sinhalese, the Tamils (both Indian and Sri Lankan), the Burghers, the Moors, etc. shared a history of peaceful coexistence in the past. However, it was the British who turned the island into a unified nation. At the same time, it was the European colonials who fueled the countrymen's racial, religious, and cultural differences with their divisive policies. To delve into the root of the nationalism problem in Sri Lanka, this research will provide a brief context of the nation's colonial history and look into the policies that encouraged ethnic hostility within the population.

Prior to colonialism, Sri Lanka was known as Ceylon (until 1972) and split into three political centres of power: two Sinhalese kingdoms, Kotte and Kandy, and one Tamil kingdom, Jaffna. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to invade the island in 1505. While intending to take control of the cinnamon trade upon arrival, the Portuguese later became entangled in the region's internal politics, and intruded further into portions of Kandy in the 1540s (De Silva 147), expanding to the entirety of the northern Jaffna territory by 1619. The kingdom of Kandy remained independent throughout Portuguese rule, with frequent conflicts with the colonisers against their persistent attempts at invasion. In 1638, in their effort to rid themselves of foreigners, the Kandyan king sought assistance from the VOC. However, after expelling the Portuguese in 1658, the Dutch asserted control over areas previously held by the former colonisers and gained a trade monopoly over the island. They ruled portions of the island for a

long time, until the British East India Company entered the scene. In 1796, the Dutch surrendered Ceylon, and in 1803, British control was established over the entire island.

The colonisers left their mark on the island's socio-cultural scene by creating new ethnic and religious communities (Wickramasinghe 45). The introduction of Roman Catholicism is one of the most notable legacies of the Portuguese in Sri Lanka (De Silva 181). Their missionary activities, however, were violent, forceful, and based on discriminatory practices. Not only were the followers of local religions subjected to religious persecution, coercion, and destruction of their properties, but the missionaries also offered special favours to the Christian converts, such as land grants, exemption from taxes, and preferential treatment under the law⁴. A large part of the population of both Tamil and Sinhalese origins, especially in the Portuguese-dominated coastal areas, had become Roman Catholics and assumed Portuguese surnames⁵. To further increase their religious and cultural influence across the island and encourage conversion, especially among the younger generation, the Portuguese also set up missionary schools. The Dutch viewed Roman Catholicism as a political threat due to its association with the previous Portuguese rulers. Therefore, they replaced Roman Catholicism with Calvinism and adopted a hostile policy toward the former religion's followers. Despite their tolerance of local religions compared to their predecessors, Hindus and Muslims were still harassed for their faiths, their practices were banned in towns, and persecutions of Catholics continued⁶. These efforts

⁴ Christianity also attracted lower caste Lankans as it offered upward caste mobility, while for the Sinhalese elites, conversion was necessary to retain their traditionally honourable positions (De Silva 181).

⁵ Between 1624 and 1626, Franciscans alone reportedly converted 52,000 people. By 1634, Friar Paulo da Trindade recorded over 70,000 adult Christians and children under instruction across 25 Franciscan parishes. Estimating for all 42 parishes, the Christian population likely reached 115,000 in Jaffna (Abeyasinghe 54)

⁶ Only the Sinhalese Buddhists were free to practice their faith as the Dutch did not wish to offend the Kandyan King who patronized Buddhism.

diminished over time, yet some conversions among locals occurred⁷. The colonial influence also brought forth new ethnic identities. Through intermarriage between Portuguese men and local women, the Portuguese Burghers⁸ emerged as a loyal, multilingual, mixed-race group. They allowed the colonial rulers to increase the manpower needed for maintaining administration, trade, and communication with the locals (Abeyasinghe 26). They were well educated in missionary schools and were given high positions in the military and civil service. The tradition continued in the Dutch era⁹. Burgher children experienced significant privileges in terms of education and work. In the colonial social hierarchy, the native population was deprived of social privileges while the Eurasian community functioned as the intermediary between the locals and colonisers.

Both the Portuguese and the Dutch periods show early evidence of favouritism towards particular communities and oppression of others. This legacy of division and oppression continued in the British period. Contrary to the Portuguese and the Dutch, who prioritised extracting service, revenue, and products for trade through existing frameworks, it was British rule that most clearly attempted to create a modern colonial state where natives would become colonial subjects (Wickramasinghe 9). Even though the British unified the island under a single administration, they also propagated divisions by privileging certain ethnic and social groups over others. The administrative and political structures in British Ceylon were dominated by

⁷ Similar to the Portuguese period, the material advantages of being associated with the state attracted elite groups looking to maintain their position of high authority. The Dutch church did not lack converts among the lower class either. See De Silva, "The Impact of Dutch Rule." *A History of Sri Lanka*, pp. 249-264.

⁸ Burghers are a small Eurasian ethnic group in Sri Lanka descended from Portuguese, Dutch, and British origins.

⁹ The Dutch attempts to encourage their countrymen to settle in the occupied lands were unsuccessful, but lower-ranking military recruits were enticed by the promise of free land and married local women, giving rise to the Dutch Burgher community (Wickramasinghe 27).

Europeans, and the limited Ceylonese representation only included the local elite¹⁰. Similar to their colonial predecessors, the British favoured the minority of locals educated in English from Burgher and Tamil communities for the sake of their administrative convenience. These groups were the same elites who had received colonial privileges in the Portuguese and Dutch periods, mostly for their Christian background and for coming from coastal regions with access to more Western influence¹¹ compared to their Kandyan Sinhalese and non-Christian Tamil counterparts in the central areas, who made up the majority of the Ceylonese population (44). This led to an overrepresentation of Tamils in higher education and government jobs, especially from the 1860s to 1930s (DeVotta 29). However, it is worth noting that these advantages were accessible to only a small portion of Jaffna elites, while the majority of the Sri Lankan Tamil population remained underprivileged.

Such “divide and rule” strategies were deliberate, as favouring the English-educated minorities allowed the colonisers to maintain a loyal elite class. In the aforementioned history of the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial eras, we see that the colonisers tend to favour the community that shares their values and ideals inherited from the Western modes of education newly introduced in the colonised land. This community acts as the middleman between colonisers and colonised, and allows the colonial rulers to run their administrations more conveniently. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon discusses this colonial strategy of creating a loyal intellectual class, educated in Western values. Doing so also isolates the nation’s most educated and privileged community from the interests of the masses and the nation as a whole. It

¹⁰ The 1833 Colebrooke-Cameron reforms to the Legislative Council included only three Ceylonese out of fifteen members; one each from the Low Country Sinhalese, Tamils, and Burghers (Wickramasinghe 43)

¹¹ Along with the influence of the previous colonisers, there were also significant American missionary and educational efforts in the North, making most Tamils competent in English (DeVotta 29).

encourages the local elites to view themselves as superior to the masses due to their privilege and inspires them to be driven by self-interest alone. The Jaffna Tamil elites, due to the ethnic, regional, and cultural differences, already viewed themselves as a separate entity from the mainland Sinhalese. Moreover, the privileges they received from the colonial rulers separated them even further from the interests of the island's population as a whole. Karunatilaka portrays this division through the character of Stanley Dharmendran, father of Maali's lover DD, the Minister for Youth Affairs and the only Tamil member in the Cabinet (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 51). He represents the Jaffna elite, and in his conversation with Maali, he expresses that national identity is a concept for the young generation. According to him, "there is truth in tribalism" (197), that ethnicity will always remain a determining factor for identity. "Sinhalese outnumber Tamils. But Tamils are cleverer than Sinhalese. We work harder. And we have to be better. And we have to conceal it, as well. Or the Sinhalaya gets jealous" (197). This statement portrays the sense of superiority within the elite Tamils and their belief of being more deserving of the privileges they received in the past compared to their Sinhalese counterparts. Through Stanley, the readers also see the Tamil elites' unwillingness to assimilate with the Sinhalese population as one nationality due to their superiority complex, making national unity more difficult for Sri Lankans.

However, Stanley's statement also acknowledges the bitterness of the Sinhalese people regarding the Tamil elites' history of receiving privileges. The isolation resulting from such a mindset occurs both ways, where an antagonism exists between the native, who is excluded from the advantages of colonialism, and their counterpart, who manages to turn colonial exploitation to his account (Fanon 112). The colonisers utilise these emotions and pit the colony's people against each other, making them fail to achieve national consensus and overthrow the true

common enemy. That is precisely why the Sinhalese community of Ceylon grew resentful toward the Tamils and viewed them as a threat to their interests, despite the majority of the Tamils being excluded from colonial privileges. Such bitterness from the Sinhalese would later be reflected in the state policies post-independence, with their growing influence as the majority. After independence, the Kandy-based Sinhalese-Buddhists would become a hegemonic force in the island's political and cultural scene, dominating the construction of the Ceylonese national identity.

1.3. Sri Lankan Nationalism and the Legacy of Colonial Violence: A Ruthless Cycle

Throughout the island's history, the colonial authorities' decisions and policies were based on their own values, convenience, and monetary gain, without any understanding of local customs or consideration for how they impacted the priorities and well-being of the different communities living here. As a result, the resentment from the colonial period worsened the relationship between the ethnic groups, especially the Tamil and Sinhalese, even after the nation's independence. Having been marginalised throughout the colonial period, the Sinhalese community felt they had fallen behind compared to their Tamil counterparts regarding education and job opportunities. With the establishment of Western parliamentary democracy, the Sinhalese-Buddhist population of Sri Lanka gained influence as the majority. Most governments of the country prioritised the well-being of its Sinhalese-Buddhist residents and promoted division under the guise of nationalist sentiments, likely because they constituted the majority and thus ensured the ruling party's hold on power. "The strategies the elites adopted were always designed to maintain their hold on power [...] If winning office and hanging on to power called for being uncompromising, intolerant, and divisive, however, it became imperative to pursue ethnocentric policies" (DeVotta 40-41). Ironically, the Sinhalese-Buddhist political leaders

adopted the same colonial modes of discrimination their community had previously suffered, now applying them against their fellow Tamil citizens. Britain's divide-and-rule practices had made the Sinhalese Buddhists feel marginalised, and conversely, the latter's post-independence policies methodically marginalised the Tamils (21). This essay will examine the decisions during the British colonial period that disadvantaged the Sinhalese and sowed the seeds of anti-Tamil sentiments among them, and study the parallelism between the British treatment of the Sinhalese and the Sinhalese government's policies that systematically disregarded the Tamils.

The rise of the European capitalist economy in the early 19th century influenced Britain's economic policies on its colonies. The British abolished government monopolies over the export industry and introduced large-scale private land ownership in the form of plantations¹² (Wickramasinghe 35). For that purpose, the government claimed all uncultivated land without documented private ownership¹³. This initiative caused a large number of the Kandyan population to lose their lands, as traditional land ownership was generally asserted orally. The British brought in the labour required for the plantations by migrating a large number of Tamil labourers from India¹⁴. The immigrant workers had to settle in enclaves, which limited their interaction with local Sinhalese communities and prevented them from fully integrating into the Lankan population. They endured displacement, poverty, cruel working and living conditions, and physical abuse, and were systematically prevented from acquiring local languages,

¹² This shift allowed for easier land grants and tax exemptions for European investors, particularly in coffee cultivation (Wickramasinghe 36), which was later on replaced by tea.

¹³ The Crown Land Encroachment Ordinance No. 12, 1840.

¹⁴ There is little evidence that planters made a concerted effort to hire Sinhalese laborers, and it has been suggested that the unwillingness and unsuitability of the Sinhalese for work on the plantations was only later used as a convenient justification to bring in foreign labour (Wickramasinghe 37).

communicating with the locals about their issues, or participating in shared religious observances, thus reinforcing social divisions (39).

The community had been living on the island for multiple generations, and the descendants of the Tamil plantation workers had every right to be recognised as Ceylonese residents. However, in independent Ceylon, acquiring citizenship status was made nearly impossible for them. As Wickramasinghe states, “This sacralisation of the written word above the oral in administrative practices was an important part of the colonial technology of rule and embodied the distinction the British made between ‘civilised’ and native customs” (36). The first government of independent Sri Lanka reflected such principles regarding the country’s citizenship policies¹⁵. The Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 was portrayed as an attempt to define the means of obtaining Ceylonese citizenship, but in reality, it was a systematic exclusion of Indian Tamils as legitimate citizens of Sri Lanka¹⁶. The bill claimed that to be considered a citizen, one must be able to provide evidence that their father or paternal grandfather was born in Sri Lanka. This made it extremely difficult for Indian Tamils to prove their citizenship, due to their background as immigrant labourers. Moreover, the registration of births was not introduced until 1895-1897, which did not allow their forefathers to have a documented birth history (Kanapathipillai 42). Such emphasis on written documentation reflects the British strategies that previously dispossessed Kandyan individuals of their ancestral property. The bill portrays how

¹⁵ It is worth noting that the UNP government led by D. S. Senanayake did not secure a majority, and were in coalition with several independent MPs and ethnicity-based parties (Sinhala Maha Sabha, Muslim League, and Tamil Congress). Therefore, the Prime Minister’s intentions were expected to be quite secular and interested in forging a national unity among different communities (Kanapathipillai 40).

¹⁶ In defense to the Citizenship Act, the UNP leader J.R. Jayawardane claimed that the country has an “immigrant problem”, which was not created by this government or the Sinhalese, rather the British had purposefully brought Indians to Ceylon in order to crush and destroy the Sinhalese race (Kanapathipillai 65).

the postcolonial government adopted colonial strategies to disenfranchise its own citizens. The act caused approximately a million Tamils of Indian origin to become stateless (Seethi 49). It also disenfranchised a majority of Indian Tamils from voting rights, causing them to lose any potential representation in parliament (Weerawardena 23). Despite their significant contributions in sustaining the island's important tea industry, even to this day the Indian Tamils remain the least educated and most marginalised group in Sri Lanka's class and caste-conscious society (DeVotta 23).

The British favouritism experienced by a handful of Tamil elites was constantly weaponised against the Tamil peasantry in independent Sri Lanka. The community historically dominated the northern Jaffna peninsula. But in the latter half of the British period, the Sinhalese peasantry who lost their lands to plantations, were being relocated into Tamil-majority areas in the North and the East to increase agricultural productivity and better utilise underdeveloped lands¹⁷ (Peebles 37). This policy contributed to ethnic tensions as it fostered resentment among Tamils, who perceived it as an encroachment on their traditional homelands and a threat to their regional influence. However, such state-sponsored colonisation continued even in independent Sri Lanka. Between 1953 to 1981, there was a significant growth of Sinhalese-owned lands and non-local Sinhalese residents in the Northern and Eastern Tamil-dominated areas¹⁸. In the 1970s, the UNP government launched the Accelerated Mahaweli Program, a land development project that encouraged Sinhalese acquisition of Tamil regions. In some areas, the government used

¹⁷ Land Development Ordinance, 1935.

¹⁸ See Wilson (87) for the changes in ethnic composition of Northern and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka due to Sinhalese colonisation.

military forces to evict Tamils from their homes and replace them with Sinhalese¹⁹ (DeVotta 149).

In the colonial era, the British rulers favoured the English language over vernaculars to assert Western superiority and maintain their own convenience, which ended up systemically marginalising the Sinhalese community. The cycle of oppression continued, as the rise of Sinhalese populist nationalism in Ceylon compromised the interests of its minorities. The most notorious case of Sinhalese linguistic domination is the Sinhala Only Act²⁰ by the SLFP government²¹ in 1956. The law replaced English with Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka²². The demand for Sinhala-only was rooted in the perception that the English-educated Tamil elite monopolised state sector resources and opportunities, and aimed to correct this imbalance by prioritising Sinhala speakers for government jobs and education (43). However, the decision ultimately pandered to Sinhalese populist sentiments and alienated the Tamil population. The Tamil elites, who were English-educated and well-represented in the civil service under British rule, constituted a small minority. The majority of the Tamil population became completely excluded from government employment unless they learned Sinhala²³. In

¹⁹ The Accelerated Mahaweli Program was designed to develop 320,000 acres of underdeveloped lands, including areas that would benefit predominantly Sinhalese areas or areas that Sinhalese were well-positioned to colonise. While the program included little Tamil regions to begin with, later on projects that would have benefited Tamils in the Northern Peninsula were eliminated.

²⁰ Formally known as the Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956

²¹ Led by S.W.R.D Bandaranaike, although promoted as a centrist party contrary to the conservative UNP, the SLFP was a leftward leaning, pro-Buddhist entity. The party's grassroots base was made up of the Sangha (Buddhist clergy) and the Sinhalese Buddhist masses (DeVotta 61).

²² This decision also contradicted the 1946 Soulsbury Constitution, which promised that both Sinhala and Tamil will be made state languages (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 115)

²³ Bonuses and pay increases were denied to government officials who did not speak Sinhala, and all public employees hired after 1956 had three years to learn the language or risk losing their jobs (DeVotta 125).

1971, the government introduced the Policy of Standardisation, which required Tamil students to gain higher scores than their Sinhalese counterparts for university admission²⁴. These policies caused unemployment to increase within the Tamil community as it became more difficult for the youth to enrol in universities or obtain civil service jobs²⁵.

After the Sinhala Only bill's approval in 1956, the country saw its first organised violence against the Tamils, also known as the Gal Oya riots²⁶. In 1958, another anti-Tamil pogrom took place, causing hundreds of Tamils to be murdered and thousands displaced (113), subjecting a large number of the Tamil population to unspeakable violence²⁷. The upcoming decades saw back-to-back incidents of anti-Tamil violence of increasing severity. In the August 1977 anti-Tamil riots, Sinhalese mobs killed nearly a hundred Tamils (149), and the burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981 killed four Tamils and destroyed about 100,000 ancient and rare documents, convincing Tamils that some Sinhalese were determined to annihilate their culture (150)²⁸. However, the worst anti-Tamil riots in the nation's history took place when the LTTE ambushed and killed thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers in the north in July 1983. In retaliation,

²⁴ Due to the Sinhala Only act, the number of Sinhalese educated students wanting university admission increased higher than the state's capacity to accommodate them. The second Sirimavo Bandaranaike government (1970–77) sought to overcome this blocked mobility by the Standardisation Policy (DeVotta 137).

²⁵ In 1956, Tamils held a significant share of public sector jobs in Sri Lanka, including 30% of the administrative service, 50% of clerical positions, 60% of engineering and medical roles, and 40% of both the armed forces and labor force. By 1970, Tamil participation had plummeted to 5 percent, 5 percent, 10 percent, 1 percent, and 5 percent respectively (DeVotta 126).

²⁶ A peaceful protest led by the FP in June 1956 took place on Galle Face Green. The demonstration was attacked by Sinhalese protesters. The incident led to approximately 150 Tamil deaths across the nation with no repercussions against the perpetrators.

²⁷ See Vittachi, Tarzie. *Emergency '58: The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots*.

²⁸ It is worth noting that these attacks were often triggered by anti-Tamil statements of government representatives, carried out by government sponsored goons and the ruling party's supporters playing a crucial role in the chaos (DeVotta 150).

Sinhalese mobs engaged in a weeklong violence known as “Black July.” The atrocities were not limited to looting and burning property; Tamil citizens were burned alive in their houses and vehicles, or hacked to death in their homes (152). Tamil university students were attacked by their Sinhalese peers; while in the north, soldiers killed fourteen Tamil civilians. In Colombo, pro-government groups led mobs that looted and burned Tamil homes and businesses. Over two days, around 400 Tamils were killed in the capital alone, and the nationwide violence left 3000 Tamils murdered and approximately 175,000 displaced (Deane 975). The government was actively involved in the atrocities; rioters were transported in government vehicles and provided with electoral registration forms to identify targets. Government officials were seen leading mobs against Tamil individuals, homes, and businesses. Extremist bhikkhus, Sinhalese nationalists, politicians, and ruling party goondas, aided by security forces, escalated the massacre. In response to the Black July massacre, thousands of Tamil youths began to flee north to join the LTTE (DeVotta 153). In response to the LTTE’s terrorist activities, the Prevention of Terrorism Act was introduced in 1979 in Sri Lanka, granting the police and armed forces broad powers to arrest, search, and detain individuals, as well as to impose internment. Although initially intended as a temporary measure, the Act was made permanent in July 1982. However, in practice, the vague provisions of the act allowed the state to abuse power by providing a legal framework to arrest, detain, and torture civilians without any accountability.

The cause of Sinhalese-Buddhist violence against minorities in Sri Lanka in its postcolonial era can be understood by studying the works of Frantz Fanon. After the colonisers leave, the newly independent nation struggles to develop a national consciousness because of the large gap that exists between the nation’s masses and the bourgeoisie. Due to the divisions that were created in the colonial era, the national consciousness fails to encompass the aspirations of

the nation as a whole, becoming confined to the idea of a particular community. “[...] the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state” (Fanon 148-149). In their attempt to restore the glory that is now lost, to prevent losing their identity to Western influences, the intellectuals of a postcolonial nation strive to reclaim their identity from the past. This, Fanon claims, is impossible: “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (210). That is precisely the case in independent Sri Lanka. As the nation’s own past has been distorted due to its contact with colonialism, the ruling governments throughout the country’s post-independence history constructed a national identity synonymous with the Sinhalese-Buddhist identity, in their attempt to restore the glory of the ancient Kandyan Kingdom.

Moreover, Frantz Fanon’s discussion on the nature of postcolonial nationalism and nationalist leaders also sheds light on governments’ motives for promoting violence against their citizens. In the chapter titled “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” Fanon discusses that the national bourgeoisie that takes over the new nation inherits the colonial framework left behind by the colonisers. In their inexperience in ruling, they mimic the behaviours and strategies of their predecessors and reproduce oppression of a similar nature on their citizens. Colonialism creates unequal development by structuring the colony’s economy in a self-serving manner. It brings forth necessary infrastructural development that ensures the comfortable extraction of the resources they need, enriching a few regions while leaving the rest of the colony in poverty and underdevelopment (158-159). That is why we see the Sinhalese-favouring governments of Sri Lanka unequally distribute resources and prioritise development in the Sinhalese regions while depriving the Tamils and other minorities of equal privileges as citizens, because ruling parties

themselves have a Sinhalese background and cater to Sinhalese populism. The deliberate attempts to establish Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism as synonymous with Sri Lankan nationalism make the minorities of the state feel alienated. In consequence, along with the violence and discrimination inflicted upon them, the isolation from Sri Lankan nationality leads to the emergence of separatist sentiments, such as the Tamils demanding Eelam.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon characterises colonisation as an enterprise rooted in violence. The very first encounter between the settlers and the natives was “marked by violence and their existence together—that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler—was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons” (36). As the control over colonised land was taken through violent means, to dismantle that system, as well as to rediscover the native identity, the process of decolonisation must inevitably involve violence. It cannot be achieved through a gentleman’s agreement, as the colonials would prefer. They would label attempts at armed resistance as “unreasonable”, holding the victims responsible for acts of “barbarism”. The colonised, on the other hand, have been driven to a point of desperation, as Sartre states in the preface: “this irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man recreating himself” (Sartre 21). It is a form of constructive violence that corrects the colonial neurosis imposed upon them, and emancipates them from the violent system that chained them. This theory is applicable not only in a colonial context but also in any hegemony that is similarly established through violence. In a postcolonial state, the ruling elite inherits the colonial frameworks of governance and control. Just as colonial rulers view natives as a barbaric entity separate from them, so do the authorities of a postcolonial state. They use nationalist rhetoric to construct an internal “other” within the nation, who threatens its unity and sovereignty. They also use the governing

institutions to oppress citizens challenging their hold on power. Given that the foundation of postcolonial nationalism is rooted in conflict, it reproduces a similar conflict of interest within its own community. In this scenario, this essay has established that in the context of the Sri Lankan state during the civil war, the government's modes of operation were inseparable from violence akin to the colonial era. Government-endorsed extrajudicial killings, false imprisonment, mob violence, forced displacements, etc. toward minorities, along with the economic decline during the civil war, left its victims no choice but to resort to violence in an attempt to bring about a meaningful change, giving rise to organisations like the Marxist JVP and Tamil separatist LTTE.

The Tamil militant organisation LTTE also emerged as a response to create armed resistance against the violence unleashed upon the Tamil community. It aimed to establish a historical homeland for the Tamils, the "Tamil Eelam," based on the former Jaffna kingdom. The TULF was the first to voice the demand for a separate Tamil state²⁹. However, the LTTE officially began the civil war in 1983, and continued to engage in various acts of terrorism, including hijacking, bombing, kidnapping, destruction of property, political murders and assassinations against not only Sinhalese but also Tamil individuals who did not align with their radical ideology. The group massacred Sinhalese and Muslim civilians from the northern and eastern regions of the country. In total, over 3000 civilians, including women and young children, were brutally killed during the period between 1984 and 2004 (Samaranayake 178). The organisation is most notorious for its seasoned cadre of suicide bombers, the "Black Tigers" (174). The group conducted multiple political assassinations through the use of suicide bombers. "From 1977 to July 1983, the Tigers killed 11 Tamil politicians, 13 police informants and 16

²⁹ Tamil United Liberation Front was a coalition of Tamil political parties proposed for the Tamil Eelam in the Vaddukai Resolution in 1976. They won most Tamil seats in the 1977 election, however, were banned from parliament for promoting separatism (Wilson 114).

civilians [...] and most infamously Ranasinghe Premadasa, the president of Sri Lanka in 1993 and Rajiv Gandhi, the prime minister of India in May 1991” (176). They were also infamous for recruiting and training child soldiers, deploying them on the front lines of battle.

The driving forces of the Civil War, which are the emergence of Tamil separatism and nationalism in Sri Lanka, are a direct consequence of the state-endorsed discrimination and violence of the Sinhalese nationalist governments³⁰. However, the Tamil nationalist sentiments also emerge under conditions similar to what gave rise to Sinhalese nationalist ideals, which is the urge to rebel against the injustice and discrimination toward their community by a foreign “other”. It motivates political parties to demand a separate Tamil state³¹, and serves as the ground for radical militant organisations like the LTTE to call for civil war. However, Tamil nationalism also exhibits the problems of postcolonial nationalism as discussed earlier. Their sentiments, too, are based on the need to eradicate the Sinhalese “other” that oppresses their community. Yet, in this pursuit, they also ignore the well-being of the remaining minorities, the “others” who are weaker in number and more vulnerable. The Tamils in Sri Lanka also consist of the Indian Tamil community brought to the island during the British period as plantation workers who do not associate themselves with Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism, yet fall victim to Sinhalese mob violence (Kearney 899). There are also Muslim Tamil-speakers who prefer not to associate with the Sri Lankan Hindu Tamils and call themselves Moors. However, the Tamil nationalists do not

³⁰ The Tamil Federal Party founded in 1949 advocated for unity among all Tamil citizens and the preservation and recognition of Tamil language, culture and identity equal to their Sinhalese counterparts. “Till 1974 the FP did not demand self determination, let alone separate statehood. Only when driven to the wall by the discriminatory policies of Sinhalese-dominated governments, especially during the periods 1960-5 and 1970-7, did the demand for separate statehood emerge. Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism thus became a serious force only in the 1970s” (Wilson 83)

³¹ In the Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) was the first party to issue a clear public demand for a separate Tamil state to be called Eelam.

include the Indian Tamils, the Moors, and the other non-Sinhalese communities in the Tamil regions who have been living on the island since ancient times in their resistance against the state. Moreover, Tamil claims for a separate state are based in part on the community's territorial concentration in the northern and eastern parts of the island, which they refer to as the Tamils' traditional homeland although nearly 512,000 Sri Lankan Tamils, or more than a quarter of the ethnic group, lived in districts other than the North and East (899-901). In the LTTE as well, all members are Sri Lankan Tamils; the group is not inclusive of other non-Sinhalese minorities such as Muslims or Indian Tamils (Samaranayake 174). Therefore, it can be said that the Tamil nationalism surfacing as a counter to Sinhalese hegemonic nationalism is equally non-inclusive in nature.

Therefore, both nation and nationalism are vague, shifting identities, and quite dangerous in a postcolonial context, considering the very foundation of a postcolonial nation is built upon violence and division. Any resistance created in opposition to the violent and discriminatory nature of postcolonial nationalism is also doomed to repeat the same patterns. A nation founded on the desire to defeat a foreign “other” continues to seek potential threats to its sovereignty, even after achieving independence. As it imagines itself as a community, it also imagines another community within itself to unleash violence upon, as seen in the conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese national identity, inherently rooted in ethno-cultural differences, marginalises the large variety of non-Sinhalese citizens. Such sentiments are reflected in the ideologies of the political parties that came to power after being elected by the Sinhalese majority, as well as the policies they adopted during their reign. Karunatilaka also echoes this sentiment in his novel: “The nation divides into races, the races divide into factions and the factions turn on each other. Whoever is in the opposition will preach multiculturalism

and then enforce Sinhala Buddhist dominance in exchange for power” (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 20). However, by doing so, the nation also witnesses systematic erasure of the identity, language, culture, and even basic human rights of its minority populations. In the Sinhalese majority’s efforts to establish a linguistic and cultural hegemony through violence and oppression, any potential for a Sri Lankan national identity is lost. The Tamil nationalists, too, do not include the other minorities in their struggle for emancipation, yet these minorities suffer the consequences of the war. It is reasonable to draw the conclusion that even if a Tamil state is realised following the LTTE’s ambitions, the minorities in that nation will also be subjected to the same discrimination and oppression faced by the minorities of modern day Sri Lanka, because that imaginary Tamil state will also be built on the same divisive foundations of nationalism. Despite being separated, the issues of ethnic violence existing today will persist as long as a nation’s identity is based on an antithesis of themselves, an imaginary “other.” Both Tamil and Sinhalese nationalists seek the domination of their own ethnoreligious identities, yet neither feels concerned about the well-being of the island’s other minorities. As a result, none of these national identities is capable of containing the essence of Sri Lankan nationality as a whole, including all the communities residing here.

In this context, Karunatilaka uses his novel to comment on the violence propagated by both nationalists and to take a stance against retributory violence. As the systemic marginalisation and unchecked violence against Tamils continued, the tension between the nation’s two largest ethnic communities increased, and dissatisfaction continued to grow among the Tamils. The community, especially the youth³², gradually grew radicalised against the

³² The obstacles in education and employment opportunities frustrated the Tamil youth, as well as the radical leftist Sinhalese group JVP’s attempts to overthrow the government in 1971 also inspired them to resort to violence (De Silva 692).

Sinhalese and had no choice but to resort to violence, demanding a separate state. Similarly, the long-term economic decline, along with continuous political oppression, also made Sri Lankan youth frustrated and affiliated with radical organisations like the JVP, causing the back-to-back insurrections. This echoes Fanon's concept of constructive violence: that under a social structure built on the foundation of violence and oppression, the only effective way to attain justice is through counterviolence against the oppressors. However, in *The Seven Moons*, Karunatilaka portrays how easy it is to lose track of the purpose of justice and correction through a violent approach. Moreover, the novel captures the nuanced nature of violence in a postcolonial state. It is not only a war of binaries between Tamils and Sinhalese; rather, a variety of factions with different self-interests are involved. Karunatilaka's portrayal of the civil war shows how violence driven by vengeance and self-interest fuels further hatred, causing hundreds of innocent deaths. By portraying the atrocities of the LTTE and through characters like Sena Pathirana and Drivermalli, the author shows how violence in response to violence severely affects innocents without bringing meaningful change.

The ghost of former JVP member Sena Pathirana's ideological stance reflects similar values advocating for violence as retribution; however, Karunatilaka also shows the dangers that lie within it. The novel introduces Sena Pathirana as a JVP activist³³ and a victim of extrajudicial murder by the government's forces. He wanders around the "In Between," to keep newly deceased souls like Maali away from "The Light," and to seek revenge for their deaths in an attempt to bring change to the living world. Sena believes in revenge through violent means and takes a strong stance against forgetting. He preaches that counter-violence is necessary in their

³³A leftist organisation of Sri Lanka, which led the first attempts at a violent overthrow of the government: once in 1971 (SLFP), and another in 1987–1989 (UNP) (De Silva 692), causing its members to be mass targeted by the state's law enforcement groups and become victims of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances.

world, which is built on the foundation of violence. It is a way of correcting the world and bringing positive changes. For that purpose, he organises the “Mission Kuveni,” which aims to raise an army of the dead and intervene in the living world to avenge their deceased souls. He also strives to destroy the “boru,” or lies promoted by the government, about equality, citizenship, the government’s protection of its citizens’ rights, and its stances against terrorism (82), as the reality does not reflect the government’s claims at all. Sena’s philosophy on violence mirrors Fanon’s ideas. However, although Sena’s cause seems convincing in the beginning, his actions reflect the contrary once he gains enough power. He becomes a tyrannical force obsessed with vengeance, even if it comes at the cost of innocents. His army orchestrates an accident to kill their killers, Balal and Kottu. However, in the process, he kills innocent bystanders and dismisses such deaths as collateral damage: “No one wants innocents to die. But we sacrifice a few to save many. That’s how wars work” (268). This mirrors the rhetoric used by oppressive regimes to justify violence against their citizens. Sena becomes indistinguishable from the very authorities he seeks to overthrow by reinforcing the same cycle of brutality he initially aimed to end.

Initially, the purpose of Tamil separatist sentiments was to counter the discrimination and violence imposed by the Sinhalese-dominated state. However, terrorist organisations like the LTTE that emerged as a result continued the same cycle of violence against civilians. In *The Seven Moons*, Karunatilaka attempts to portray the pointlessness of war and how it does nothing except kill innocents on both sides. The character Drivermalli is an undercover LTTE cadre. In the climax of the novel, he executes a suicide mission influenced by the army of Sena, killing all of Sena’s targets and many more civilians, except for the minister Cyril. In this scene, Maali’s conversation with Drivermalli communicates Karunatilaka’s message on the pointlessness of

war. Drivermalli's final words are, "All enemy combatants are complicit. All deserve death. Perhaps my worthless life will finally be worth something. Otherwise, what was the point?" (297). This statement conveys the flawed principle of justice driven by violence and vengeance, highlighting how it fails to achieve its purpose. Drivermalli had lost his family and leg in an army shelling. He suffered from state-endorsed violence simply for his ethnicity, despite having no connection with terrorist activities. It is violence that makes him wish to seek justice and draws him into the LTTE. However, after becoming a Tiger, he perpetuates the same violence he suffered from and unleashes it on a building of innocent civilians. Drivermalli's inability to critically reconsider his self-destructive actions also portrays how he has been brainwashed to the point where destroying himself for a pseudo-sense of justice is the only way he can feel his life was meaningful. Maali attempts to communicate these sentiments with his final whisper, "We send pawns to kill kings. But bad kings get replaced by worse kings, and more pawns get sent to die" (295). In Maali's eyes, Drivermalli's life is not meaningless; rather, it is sacrificing his life in such a manner that is meaningless. His life is not worth sacrificing for what he thinks is a great cause of justice, as in the end, it changes nothing. Moreover, the retribution of the oppressed is also used by the oppressor to produce a discourse that denies any responsibility for their cruelty. For example, the Sinhalese minister Cyril Wijeratne calls 1983 a time "when the sleeping lion was woken" (111). He denies not only his direct involvement but also any fault of his people for the cruelties of Black July, using the actions of a terrorist organisation as an excuse to unleash violence upon a whole community. Moreover, in the context of the JVP insurgencies, he promised to abuse his power as the majority representative against the rebels, "Twelve of yours for one of ours" (23), which resulted in, according to Sena, the disappearance and death of twenty thousand JVP members (23).

Therefore, throughout the novel, Karunatilaka aims to establish the futility of war and how it only breeds violence in retribution for violence, leading innocents to their deaths, and at the same time, allowing the perpetrators to manipulate the efforts of the victims to build a narrative against them. The actions of JVP and LTTE, portrayed through the characters of Sena Pathirana and Drivermalli, show two potential outcomes of attempting to achieve justice through violent means. It either blinds one with power, or provides one with a false sense of greater purpose, or gives the oppressors more leverage over the narrative, none of which ends up bringing any meaningful change.

Chapter 2 Role of Myth and History in the Formation of Postcolonial Nationalism

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida establishes that violence is essentially pointless when it comes to stopping the war and bringing justice, as it changes nothing except causing the deaths of innocents. Instead of countering violence with further violence, Karunatilaka focuses on the narratives that create such hegemonic or separatist sentiments that encourage mob violence and terrorist activities. To understand the development of exclusionary nationalist sentiments in Sri Lanka that fuel division among both Tamil and Sinhalese groups, it is necessary to examine how the discourse based on interpretations of history, contribute to the development of a pseudo-sense of nationalism. Moreover, by studying the works of Michel Foucault, this essay will portray how nationalism's construction relies on the relationship between knowledge and power. Favouring one side of history over another, the role of power in building such narratives and maintaining them as objective facts is crucial to nationalism, and this research will study how Karunatilaka conveys these aspects in his novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*.

2.1. The Interplay Between Power and History

The formation of nationalism is inseparable from history and what is perceived as historical truth. This research consults the theories of Michel Foucault to understand how historical truths are a product of exercising power over the masses by various institutions. In the chapter "The Historical A Priori and the Archive" of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault suggests an alternative way of understanding history and knowledge. In this text, the concept of archaeology functions as a metaphor for the underlying thought processes that shape the development of ideas over time. According to Foucault, knowledge is not a collection of neutral

or objective facts. Rather, it is a product influenced by the context in which it was created, directly tied to power, language, and historical events of a particular time. Knowledge is produced through “discursive formations”—a historically specific way of thinking and speaking about a subject. These ideas, however, shift over time along with the changes in social structures. Foucault's method focuses on analysing these changes. He emphasises that it is not individual beliefs, but the broader systems and institutions that condition the general consensus on a subject. Socio-political institutions such as schools, governments, prisons, media, churches, etc., construct what Foucault calls “regimes of truth”. These are mechanisms through which power and knowledge are exercised and maintained. The standards and expectations of normalcy set by the regimes of truth determine which facts, ideas, and behaviours are to be generally accepted as true or correct, leading to the creation of knowledge. Foucault further expands the relationship between truth and power in the collection of lectures *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. In this text, Foucault aims to redefine our understanding of power and how it is inseparable from truth and knowledge. He suggests that power is not a possession but a network of relations that produces effects of truth. These discourses of truth and a corresponding body of knowledge exist to justify power. As Michel Foucault states in *Power/Knowledge*:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures

accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 131)

Power produces knowledge, and knowledge functions as a tool to exercise authority and maintain hold on power. Therefore, what we consider history is almost never the objective truth, but rather narratives produced and promoted by power. The discourse constructed by power and regimes of truth determines what is known and accepted as the truth. Thus, it is crucial to examine how these discourses are constructed and how they shape a nation's perception of their identity.

As postcolonial nationalism is heavily based on the othering of religious or ethnic communities, the ruling governments rarely hesitate to dehumanise their fellow citizens through various epistemological institutions. This also includes subjective interpretations of historical narratives in order to legitimise their atrocities. It is essential to consider that the violence unleashed by governments as a consequence of postcolonial nationalism is not always only physical, but also often based on discourse. The state's authorities rely on existing historical materials to either manipulate information or interpret texts in a way that allows them to derive a discourse that legitimises their agenda. At the same time, those in power can also actively produce a narrative that decides what will be perceived as objective historical facts in the future. In the context of Sri Lanka, this research will examine the ancient historical chronicle *Mahavamsa* and how it has been perceived and interpreted by Sinhalese-Buddhist monks, scholars or government officials in postcolonial Sri Lanka to legitimise the oppression of minorities in the country. Moreover, this study will also look into how Karunatilaka approaches these elements in his novel.

2.2. Myth, History and Nationalism: A Study of the *Mahavamsa*

The development of ethno-based nationalism in Sri Lanka has its origins in how history has been interpreted and presented in mainstream discourse. In many cases, ethno-religious nationalists tend to rely on the concept of historical ownership to assert the superiority of one community over another. Their purpose, firstly, is to establish a certain community's sole claim over a certain landscape, and secondly, to create an internal, imaginary "other" that validates their own sense of self. It echoes the Saidian notion of a "foreign other" from his seminal text, *Orientalism*, where he studies how Western scholars used non-European languages, historical texts, practices, religious, and cultural values to view these countries through a negative lens and to construct a discourse that allowed them to establish European superiority and justify colonial domination. This can also be seen in the case of both Tamil and Sinhalese nationalists, who also claim to be the original dwellers of the island and create a binary between the "national self" and "national other" to legitimise their claims. This binary is also echoed constantly throughout Karunatilaka's novel in the interactions between Tamil and Sinhalese characters. In Cyril's conversation with the Tamil NGO officer Elsa Mathangi, he denies any involvement with the mob violence of '83 and states, "1983 was your people's fault, not mine, [...] If you wake a sleeping lion, it will maul you" (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 183).

This concept of a leonine origin is addressed throughout the novel because the Sinhalese understanding of their national self is rooted in the Buddhist chronicle *Mahavamsa*. The *Mahavamsa* is considered the oldest historical literature discovered in South Asia (Kemper, *The Presence* 2). The epistemological role of historical writing is undeniable in terms of political importance. Therefore, the interpretation of a particular historical text can be politically driven, and as a result, the knowledge derived from it can become propagandistic in nature, far from the

objective truth. Initially, the colonial historians' reading of ancient Sri Lankan history relied heavily on this text. Written in Pali verse, the *Mahavamsa* begins with the narration by the Buddhist monk Mahanama from the sixth century CE onwards. It was continually updated by later writers, documenting kings, monks, wars, and religious acts from the time of the Buddha to the fourth century CE (Spencer 5), and is the source of many myths regarding the island's origin. However, keeping Foucault's ideas and the context of the text's production period in mind, the *Mahavamsa* is not an authentic or objective representation of Sri Lankan history and its entire population. The text was produced to serve a specific didactic purpose, which was to establish Buddhist supremacy on the island and to legitimise its then rulers' support of Buddhism. As stated in the *Mahavamsa*, the founder of the Sinhalese race was the North Indian Prince Vijaya, who arrived on the island with seven hundred followers after being exiled by his father (DeVotta 24). The Sinhalese nationalists faithfully rely on the ancient text as their most reliable source of history despite its obvious mythical elements, as it provides legitimacy to the Sinhalese-Buddhist domination on the island. In fact, it has been so heavily invoked in the Sinhalese nationalist narrative of history that most Sinhalese believe it to be an indisputable truth (25). According to the *Mahavamsa*, Buddha himself had appointed the Sinhalese to establish and preserve Buddhism on the island: "Vijaya, son of king Simhabahu, is come to Lanka from the country of Lala, together with seven hundred followers. In Lanka, O lord of gods, will my religion be established, therefore carefully protect him with his followers and Lanka" (Mahanama 55). However, it is essential to consider that the purpose of histories, or "Vamsas", is to praise or condemn, to highlight a moral, or to explain an existing relationship or practice. "Taken at their own words, vamsas want to edify" (Kemper, "J. R. Jayewardene" 188). Therefore, the accuracy of the claims made in *Mahavamsa* is inherently questionable as it can be propagandist in nature.

He also states, “the chronicle’s initial purpose was to celebrate the relationship between the Theravada monkhood, following one version of the Buddha’s teachings, and the monarchy” (Kemper, *The Presence* 3)³⁴. Therefore, it cannot be considered a source to derive the Sri Lankan national identity from, as it does not represent any Sri Lankan who is not both Sinhalese and Buddhist.

Regardless, from the 1930s, the text was appropriated and exploited by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist politicians to promote their ideologies, solidify their claim over the island as their promised historical homeland, and weaponise the text’s interpretation against the country’s minorities. The renowned Buddhist monk and political advisor Venerable Sobitha argues that even decentralising power on the island by giving the northern Tamils regional authority will be a sacrilege to the religious sentiments of the Sinhalese-Buddhists and their wishes to establish Sri Lanka as a Buddhist island (Bartholomeusz 33). Moreover, the *Mahavamsa*’s justifications for the wars conducted by former rulers have also been used by Sinhalese nationalists to legitimise the violence against minorities during the civil war. The text implies that “the karmic repercussions for killing non-Buddhists are far less than for killing those who embrace the dharma” (57). Moreover, it also argues that killing for the sake of protection does not contradict Buddhism’s obligation not to engage in violence (57-58), a notion that dehumanises the island’s Tamils and labels them as terrorists from whom the nation needs protection, although their violence began as a form of retribution. In this way, historical interpretation and religious sentiments are weaponised to claim authority over the entirety of the island by a single ethnicity. In 1990, the then President J. R. Jayewardene drew upon ancient mythological symbols outside

³⁴ This religious continuity is closely tied to the history of the Sri Lankan state. “The Mahavamsa assumes the mutual necessity of kings and clerics, as well as society’s need for both. Kings patronize the religion and observe its ceremonies; clerics educate kings and bend their policies in the direction of wisdom” (Kemper, “J.R.Jayewardene” 188).

their traditional ritual context to shape his political identity. He emphasised the centralising authority of the Buddhist monarchy and positioned himself as a successor to the Sinhalese kings of Vijaya's lineage. His Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa also reinforced this framework by explicitly identifying with the Buddhist warrior King Dutthagamunu (De Silva-Wijeyeratne and Kapfere 244). Such instances are likely Karunatilaka's inspiration for portraying the character Cyril Wijeratne, whose lack of empathy for the country's minorities mirrors the sentiments of Sinhalese politicians in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, as Kemper states, "The Mahavamsa is certainly not the Sri Lankan national chronicle, for Tamils, Muslims, and Christians today would have difficulty seeing themselves and their history reflected in the text. And to call it the Sinhala national chronicle raises other problems because Sinhala ethnic identity developed only centuries after events the Mahavamsa describes in what appear to be ethnic terms. The Mahavamsa has become the warrant for the interlocked beliefs that the island and its government have traditionally been Sinhala and Buddhist, and that a person cannot be Buddhist without being Sinhala" (*The Presence* 3). It is used as a tool for Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists to limit Sri Lanka's identity as a nation, making it synonymous with Sinhala-Buddhism, to assert their claim over the island and legitimise the oppression of their minorities by deeming them not to historically 'belong' here. Through the Vijaya myth, the Sinhalese claim descent from the Aryans of northern India and consider themselves the original settlers of the country (Samaranayake 172). The Sri Lankan Tamils, on the other hand, believe they originated from the Dravidian stock of South India and claim the northern Jaffna territory as their ancient homeland, demanding its re-establishment as a nation separate from the Sinhalese. However, it is important to consider that the division of Sinhalese-Tamil dominated regions is not as binary as both sides claim, and nor is it based on the

grounds of language, ethnicity, or religious differences. In fact, there are adequate arguments regarding what it means to be a Tamil or a Sinhalese in the first place. Although the Sri Lankan Tamils do not have a politically motivated scripture like the *Mahavamsa* to attest to their claim as the original dwellers, they assert that due to Sri Lanka's proximity to South India, the Dravidians most likely settled in the northern regions of the island long before the arrival of Vijaya (DeVotta 25). Evidence of early historical Tamil settlements, urban and trade centres found in Northern Sri Lanka, dating back to the Third century BC, attests to the claim (De Silva 12-13). Moreover, scholars also argue that there are essentially no differences between Sinhalese and Tamil people in terms of origin, and it is highly likely that the Tamils dwelling on the island from ancient times converted to Buddhism and Indo-Aryan linguistic traditions, claiming a Sinhalese identity³⁵. Later on, the intermarriage and hybridisation of the two groups throughout history made both groups indistinguishable apart from linguistic differences. Nissan and Stirrat (23) present evidence of the arrival and peaceful coexistence of the diverse ethnic groups that comprised the island prior to colonialism. Ancient Sinhala-Buddhist civilisations like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa contain evidence of Tamil-speaking residents, as well as soldiers working in crucial positions in the armies of Sinhala kings. Moreover, the Tamil-dominated region of Jaffna has places named in Sinhalese, and Tamil-named places also exist in Sinhala-dominated areas. In the southwest coastal regions, castes such as the Salagama, Durava, and Karava are descendants of South Indian Hindu immigrants who gradually adopted the Sinhala identity, yet continued using Tamil as their native language. Even Kandy, despite being represented in modern Sinhala-Buddhist history as the refuge of indigenous Sinhala culture, was ruled in its final years by a dynasty of Tamil-speaking kings, the Nayakkars from

³⁵ Kemper (*The Presence 116-117*) citing Samuel Livingstone's letters to his son. Similar arguments are also found in DeVotta's citation of historian Satchi Ponnambalam (DeVotta 25)

Madurai in South India (23). The binary of Sinhalese versus Tamils was not an essential factor of ancient Sri Lankan society; rather, communities from various ethnic identities coexisted.

Evidently, the binary of Tamil and Sinhalese identities is not only a modern political phenomenon, but an intentional product of propagandistic representation of history.

2.3. The Weaponisation of Myths and History to Construct Nationalism: Portrayed in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

The paper demonstrates that myths and historical texts can be produced and interpreted in a manner that fosters a discourse serving the interests of a particular group. According to Saha and Sarbadhikary, myths also represent the nation's collective psyche, become embedded in history, and are used by the nation to construct its identity (6). In the case of Sri Lanka, the mythical accounts of the *Mahavamsa* are used to develop the Sinhalese national identity.

Karunatilaka's discussion of the Vijaya myth in his novel criticises the portrayal of the nation's origin. According to the *Mahavamsa*, cited in Strathern (5), the origin story of the Sinhalese community begins when the daughter of the king of Vanga is abducted by a lion and bears it a son and a daughter. Eventually, they escape, and later the son "Simhabahu" (arm of the lion) grows up and kills his lion father. He then founds a new kingdom and marries his sister. Their eldest son, Vijaya, due to his troublesome nature, is cast out to sea with seven hundred followers. The prince ends up on the coast of Lanka, which was then only home to "Yakkhas," or demons. There, he meets the Yakkhini queen Kuveni, who seduces and traps his men; Vijaya outwits her, takes her to bed, and slays the demons with her help. Afterwards, Vijaya assumes kingship over the island, establishes cities under his name, continues to live with Kuveni as his queen, and fathers children with her. Later on, the prince abandons Kuveni due to her status as a supernatural being and marries a Pandyan princess to legitimise his rule. The Sinhalese claim

their origin and descent from Vijaya's bloodline. Due to the prince's leonine ancestry, his followers began to call themselves Sinhala (Mahanama 36).

Karunatilaka's interpretation of the ancient text is critical: "If the Mahavamsa is to be believed, the Sinhalese race was founded on kidnapping, rape, parricide and incest. This is not a fairy tale, but the story of our birth as given by the island's oldest chronicle, a chronicle used to codify laws crafted to suppress all that is not Sinhalese and Buddhist and male and wealthy" (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 117). With this statement by Maali, the author presents an alternate perspective of the revered myth that is inseparable from the Sinhalese identity and criticises the ancient text as a political tool that encourages the discriminatory nature of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism. He calls Vijaya's people "sea pirates" and a "band of bald thugs" and claims that the glorious story of founding the Sinhalese kingdom on the island is based on the cruelty and genocide of its indigenous communities. Through Maali's conversation with the demon who guards Minister Cyril, the novel shows how the *Mahavamsa's* narrative dehumanises the local Yakkha and Naga tribes to justify slaughtering these communities:

"You know there were people here long before the Sinhalese?"

'Kuvani's people?'

'They weren't considered people. We call them devils and snakes'" (116).

Therefore, through this exchange, the author shows that the modern discursive practice of othering and dehumanising the non-Sinhalese residents of the island is derived from politically motivated texts like the *Mahavamsa*, despite the historical reality of ethno-religious harmony prevalent on the island in the precolonial period. Revering this type of historical narrative to such a high extent and determining a nation's identity from it is the leading cause of Sri Lankan

nationalist rhetoric being so reliant on the ethnic superiority of the Sinhalese, which, in consequence, oppresses other ethno-religious minorities, causing them to mimic the same behaviour in retribution. This dangerous cycle of violence is constantly addressed in *The Seven Moons* by Karunatilaka, particularly through Maali's opinions on the Sri Lankan national flag:

The lion holds the scimitar to the orange and green verticals that represent the Dravidian and Mohammedan, holding the minorities at knifepoint. As a retort, the separatist flag of Tamil Eelam has a tiger peeping Kilroy style between rifles. As if to say, I see your lion with sword, and raise you a tiger with two bayonets. Both flags have a beast and a bad layout and are the colour of blood. Eelam has the tomato red of a flesh wound, Lanka has the plum maroon of an unhealed scar. There is no evidence that either of these beasts ever roamed these lands, but here they sit on flags, waving weapons and swimming in blood. As if to acknowledge that Lanka was founded on bestiality and bloodshed. (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 118)

Moreover, through the actions of characters in positions of political authority in the novel, the author shows the construction of false narratives through abuse of political power. The Minister Cyril Wijeratne, for example, confiscates Maali's photographs upon discovering them "to examine these properly" (114) and to issue an arrest warrant against him for further questioning. Maali's photos were indisputable evidence of the government's direct involvement in the Black July massacre. Especially, the picture that shows the Minister of Justice "who looked on while the savages of '83 torched Tamil homes and slaughtered the occupants" (11). The Minister had seized the photos to prevent his involvement in the mob violence of Black July from becoming public. Later, to destroy the evidence, he arranges a curfew and orders the photographs to be burnt along with the bodies of the victims who died from the state's

extrajudicial operations under the direct supervision of the STF. Moreover, early on in the novel, portions of Maali's dead body are dumped in the Beira Lake, while the rest is burnt along with the bodies of many others by the garbage men. His death is only made known to his friends and family after the UN forensic team identifies him from the remnants of the bodies found in the Beira Lake. This information, too, was not covered in the news and was claimed by the government to be "from before 1948 and have no bearing on the current political climate" (174), until Maali's girlfriend Jaki, who also works as a news reporter, reveals it on live television without the authority's permission. As a result, she is immediately sacked and evicted from her job. Therefore, a significant part of the novel's storyline that drives the characters' actions is the battle of establishing narratives. The characters with political authorisation in the novel actively try to influence factual events by abusing their power. They strive to destroy the photo evidence of the government's atrocities and conceal the truth of people's suffering during the war. While Maali, with the help of his friends, aims to reveal the truth and publish his photos in hopes of bringing about a better change in the lives of others in future.

The novel shows how information, in the form of Maali's photographs, contains the potential to become an essential weapon with the power to change the course of history. Characters like Minister Cyril, Elsa Mathangi etc., try to claim Maali's photographs to destroy them or use them to fulfil their agendas. The protagonist himself is also aware of the power his photos hold; that is why, instead of advocating for violence like Sena or Drivermalli, Maali insists on contributing to the discourse regarding the ongoing civil war through his photographs. He believes that violence only begets violence; however, impacting the narrative that produces legitimacy for the war is the only way to make a lasting difference. This is why even after the photos are destroyed, he aims to communicate with his family and friends about the negatives'

whereabouts in his attempts to expose the truth of the civil war and put a stop to the ongoing cycle of violence.

Chapter 3 Postcolonial Nationalism: An Alternative Approach

Along with identifying the aforementioned problems that arise with the particular idea of nationalism taking root in postcolonial countries like Sri Lanka in the form of a civil war, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* also hints at an alternative way of approaching such issues. Maali's photos symbolise an epistemological way of resisting oppression, contrary to the traditional, violent approach. His actions attempt to dismantle the existing narrative about the reality of the war and the victims. However, this notion of resistance and preservation of truth is not limited to Maali's characterisation alone. The novel's plot as a whole, along with the depiction of its characters, intends to serve a similar purpose: to perceive history from a perspective removed from any influence that speaks on behalf of power. Karunatilaka incorporates the deceased victims of the war, mob violence, extrajudicial killings, military bombings, political assassinations, and similar atrocities as characters in his novel to portray their experiences. As their stories are ignored by the mainstream tellings of history, the author takes the initiative to raise awareness and give voice to their experiences on their behalf. It is essential that people whose voices are overlooked in history can find themselves represented and spoken for in literature. Therefore, by studying Karunatilaka's approach in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, this research will also advocate for the importance of such representations.

3.1. Maali's Photographs: A Counter-Narrative to Mainstream History

During the civil war, the Sri Lankan governments in power were fascist in nature. Under their rule, the media was heavily controlled to manipulate public opinion and suppress political opponents. Anyone who attempted to speak out against the state-endorsed facts was either assassinated or abducted: "In the Sri Lanka of the '80s, 'disappeared' was a passive verb,

something the government or JVP anarchists or Tiger separatists or Indian Peace Keepers could do to you depending on which province you were in and who you looked like” (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 29). The role of the media and news outlets in Sri Lanka at that time was to produce narratives that only protected the interests of the ruling parties, by legitimizing their power and avoiding any information regarding the state’s criminal activities. This resonates with Foucault’s idea of “regime of truth”—epistemological institutions that determine the course of what is perceived as reality. As a result, the telling of historical events under authoritarian regimes is most likely to be biased. The oppressed communities, whose stories are being intentionally silenced to fulfill the government’s agenda, are completely erased from history. Therefore, it is crucial not only to question the mainstream media and look beyond its narratives, but also to actively produce a discourse that resists such narratives. Constructing a counter-narrative encourages people to critically examine the knowledge fed to them by people in power and become aware of the reality around them. By being exposed to the version of truth from the perspective of the marginalised, people around the world can emotionally resonate with their suffering and raise their voices against the oppression. This can be done through art, literature, photography, or any form of media content that is capable of creating awareness. This sentiment inspires Maali to become a war photographer. He believed that “the folks in Colombo and London and Delhi didn’t know the full extent of the horrors” and his ambition was to “Do for Lanka’s civil war what naked napalm girl did for Vietnam” (212), a reference to the famous 1972 photograph of the nine-year-old girl Phan Thị Kim Phúc running naked and severely burned after a South Vietnamese napalm strike. The photo circulated widely in international media, increasing global awareness regarding the horrors of the Vietnam War and garnering criticism against the U.S. military.

For that purpose, Maali involved himself with the various factions of the war and produced photographs that revealed the violence and suffering inflicted upon people from all sides. His character is a homage to the Sri Lankan journalist and human rights activist Richard De Zoysa, abducted and murdered in 1990 most likely by the government death squads for his activism. According to the author, “He [Zoysa] was also working for all sides. He took photographs of the Tamil Tigers, the Sri Lankan army, and the Marxists. Through him, I can talk about the different factions in Sri Lankan politics at the time and also create a murder mystery, because any one of these people could have wanted him killed” (Karunatilaka, “Booker Prize Winner”). Maali presents himself in an ideologically ambiguous manner to everyone around him. Not choosing any sides not only allowed him access to the inner networks of every faction, but also kept his works devoid of any political biases. “The box had five envelopes, each named after a playing card. Ace had pictures sold to the British Embassy. King had photos commissioned by the Sinhalese Army. Queen were snaps bought by a Tamil NGO. But Jack was just for you. The fifth envelope was titled Ten, and had pictures taken of DD, and of Sri Lanka at its prettiest” (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 28-29). The contents of the first three envelopes were supplied to forces opposed to each other, but all the sides unleashed violence and cruelty upon the masses in the same manner, causing countless innocent deaths, which is the reality of war Maali attempts to expose.

Among these envelopes, Maali’s photographs contained the depiction of mob violence from the Black July massacre, the aftermath of bombings by the Lankan army and LTTE, and evidence of the government’s oppressive censorship practices: “portraits of disappeared journalists and vanished activists, bound and gagged and dead in custody”; “grainy yet identifiable snaps of an army major, a Tiger colonel, and a British arms dealer at the same table,

sharing a jug of king coconut,” showing the hidden collaboration going on between the different fronts of the war contrary to the general public perception; and “the killers of actor and heartthrob Vijaya and the wreckage of Upali’s plane on film” (11), representing the various assassinations and shellings carried out throughout the war and many more. The photographs taken for the CNTR captured a chilling depiction of the genocide of July 1983, with images like:

The lady in the pink salwar being doused with petrol. The naked boy surrounded by dancing devils. A house in Wellawatte aflame with faces pasted against the windows. These have been published and are familiar to many. Then come those deemed too gory for international publication. The boy and his mother being beaten with sticks, the toddler with the broken arm, the fellow with the cleaver hacking at an old man’s side.

(Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 107-108)

On the contrary, the pictures taken for the Sri Lankan army conveyed the violence by the LTTE, “Captured Tiger grenades, rocket launchers, rifles and boots packed into crates with Hebrew and Arabic stamps on them. Scared little boys in uniform huddling at the frontlines. The bodies at Valvettithurai piled onto a pyre, the mass cremation that made you stop eating pork because the smoky stench of roasting human wasn’t dissimilar to chops on grills” (256). The photos he calls his best work were unpublished, as they were secretly taken to capture the war crimes of the Sri Lankan army he was working for, “beautiful black-and-white prints of captured terrorists tied to logs, the wreckage of the helicopter of a moderate Tamil politician, the mangled hull of Air Lanka Flight 512 from Gatwick, taken before the bodies of the German, British, French and Japanese tourists were removed from the wreckage” (256). His photos present strong evidence against the state-imposed narratives about people who perished under the government’s oppression: “Father Jerome Balthazar, Anglican priest and human rights activist from Mannar,

bound and gagged and dead in custody, though the 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 Major Raja Udugampola's private files, but kept for yours" (256-257).

Maali was an ideologically ambiguous personality. However, the novel makes it clear that his loyalty was tied to the wellbeing of his nation and its people. The photos in the envelope titled "Ten" "show sunsets and sunrises, hills of tea and crystal beaches, pangolins and peacocks, elephants with their young, and a beautiful boy and a wonderful girl running through strawberry fields" (320), the most beautiful aspects of his country along with his loved ones, the things he fights to protect even in death. Therefore, through his pictures, Maali not only reveals the horrifying reality of war that is suppressed by the state's telling of history, but also the fact that Sri Lanka is much more than just a war-ridden, suffering country. He believes that "This island is a beautiful place, despite being filled with fools and savages" (320); therefore, he captures the side of Sri Lanka that is more than its horrors and cruelties, a beautiful island with people worth loving and fighting for.

3.2. Magic Realism as a Tool to Give Voice to the Subalterns

Maali's efforts are also echoed in the author's purpose in writing the novel. As he constructs Maali as a character fighting against subjective narratives to establish an objective perception of history, Karunatilaka himself fulfills the same purpose with his message in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It is not merely a murder-mystery novel, but a literary representation of history from the perspective of the oppressed. By incorporating magic realist elements, he tells the stories and experiences of the war's victims who were silenced during their

lifetimes, in real life and the novel's fictional world alike. His efforts show how literature can become an effective medium to give voice to the oppressed and contribute to building an essential counter-narrative to challenge the hegemonic discourse, impacting public perception of truth and history.

Authors often need to rely on various literary tools according to their intended purpose for their work. Magic realism, also known as “magical realism” or “marvellous realism,” is a postmodern literary style that combines two contradictory elements: realism with magic or fantasy. In *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Ann Bowers defines magical realism as a narrative mode that offers alternative ways of representing reality beyond Western philosophical traditions, particularly evident in postcolonial and non-Western fiction. She explains that it is a form of narrative fiction that “relies most of all upon the matter of fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings” (Bowers 2). However, the mere presence of fantastical elements in a literary work does not constitute magic realism. The distinguishing factor of this narrative approach is that it allows authors to break down the distinctions between imagination and reality and provide an explanation for real-life events through magical elements, often derived from culturally specific contexts. “The variety of magical occurrences in magic(al) realist writing includes ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents and strange atmospheres” (19). The magical elements are also often inspired by myths, legends, or renowned superstitions of the particular culture where these literary works take place. However, for many writers, magic realism is more than just a stylistic choice; it is also a literary movement that provides authors living under totalitarian regimes the opportunity to indirectly speak out about the absurd or unsettling events taking place in their oppressive political reality. As a result, the most prominent writers of the magic realist genre are from Latin American backgrounds, due to the region's

notorious history of domestic dictatorships. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* as well, author Shehan Karunatilaka makes brilliant use of magic realist tools to comment on the corrupt and oppressive nature of the Sri Lankan government. Concepts like “The Light,” the period of seven moons to transition from the “In Between” toward the afterlife, the spirits as employees who guide the dead toward “The Light,” and the demons and ghouls (e.g., the Mahakali) haunting the real world to prevent the newly dead from gaining salvation, are magic realist elements in his depiction of the afterlife that communicate crucial messages about the real state of the war-torn Lankan state. However, the focus of this thesis will be the magic realist function of the dead characters and their stories highlighted by the novel. In the context of Gayatri Spivak’s theory on the subalterns, this thesis argues that the victims of the civil war portrayed by Karunatilaka through ghosts and spirits are the silenced subalterns of Sri Lanka.

In “Can the Subalterns Speak?” Gayatri Spivak portrays how in a postcolonial world, the works of Western intellectuals fail to represent the subaltern without considering the nuances of their identities. In Spivak's essay, the term “subaltern” refers to those who are marginalised and lack representation, particularly within the context of colonial and imperial power structures. She discusses how creating the “Other of Europe” involved obliterating the textual elements that could allow a subaltern subject to form and express its identity. This obliteration occurred through ideological, scientific, and legal institutions, resulting in “epistemic violence” that systemically silences the subaltern. She cites Ranajit Guha’s argument that traditional historiography is dominated by elitism, both colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist, which credits the making of the Indian nation to elite achievements (Spivak 25-26). The “elites” in her essay are the socially, politically, and regionally dominant groups, including the dominant foreign groups and dominant indigenous groups at both the national and regional levels. In *The Seven*

Moons, this definition applies to the Sinhalese community and their representatives in the government, portrayed through Minister Cyril and Major Udugampola. The subalterns, on the other hand, are all who are left out; “social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite’” (26).

In Sri Lanka’s case, Karunatilaka does not distinguish between the Tamil and the Sinhalese to portray the oppressed. He does not attempt to show any one side as the victim of the other. Rather, in his portrayal, the oppressed subalterns are every single individual who lost their lives, families, and homes due to the horrifying impact of the war, regardless of their background. It includes people of all classes, ages, genders, religions, ethnic identities, and political ideologies. It includes Drivermalli, who lost his family due to a bombing by the Sri Lankan army, the Tamil university lecturer Dr. Ranee Sridharan of Jaffna University “slain by Tamil extremists for the crime of being a Tamil moderate” (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 6), Sena Pathirana and the members of his army: “Dead JVP-ers, Dead Tigers and Dead Innocents Suspected of Being Either” (265), the university students from Moratuwa and Jaffna, “Slain Journalists, Defiled Beauty Queens, Tortured Revolutionaries, Murdered Housewives. There are Colonial Slaves, Victims of Bombs, Beggars Killed by Drunks and Child Soldiers” (265). The stories of these people remain unknown to the world of the living. The story of Dr. Ranee, who received death threats from her own students for mapping out the ecosystem of a Tigers terror cell and of a government death squad (18) and had a husband and two daughters aged eight and ten when she was shot to death (5), or the woman in pink sari who was “a lawyer who had chambers in Maradana, until on 21 July 1983 she walked past the bus stand to buy cigarettes and encountered a Sinhalese mob with torches” (52) to be dragged by her hair and doused in petrol

then burned alive, now turned into a ghoul seeking revenge, or the headless atheist who used to be a “school teacher that ran for provincial council, whose gangster brother had him shot and won the election in his stead” (13), and countless others. Regardless of who killed them, these people share the same victimhood of war, the subalterns whose stories remain unknown. Their experiences are brought to light through the eyes of the dead Maali. He had encountered them previously in his lifetime, but he never got to know about who they were, as the reality of the nation does not allow their stories to be told. This can also be interpreted in context to Gayatri Spivak’s definition of “epistemic violence” in her essay regarding the systemic silencing of marginalised voices. Here, the distinction between the real world and the world after death is marked through the ghosts’ ability to communicate their sufferings. Much like Spivak’s description of how colonial and nationalist historiography privileges elite perspectives while excluding the experiences of the marginalised, Karunatilaka portrays the dead as those who have been silenced, firstly through their physical erasure because of war and political violence, and secondly through the refusal of official historical narratives to acknowledge or record their sufferings. The characters who have become ghosts in the novel have perished from the world of the living, and their stories are also overlooked and erased by the existing legal and political framework.

Many times throughout the novel, Maali is seen to click the shutter of his Nikon 3ST, almost as if to capture the stories of these victims as he did during his lifetime. Through his lens, the author communicates the lives and experiences of people who would have remained unknown otherwise. Karunatilaka makes use of magic realist tools and shows how as these victims are removed from their oppressive reality, they can finally speak out about their experiences, and even attempt to get revenge. In this way, the author not only gives them the

voice they had been previously deprived of, but also, to some extent, an agency to seek justice for themselves. Therefore, just like Maali, the novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is also Karunatilaka's attempt to speak against violence and tell the story of one of the darkest times in the nation's history from the perspective of the dead. By doing so, his novel also addresses the problem with the nationalist sentiments in Sri Lanka, and contributes to the body of knowledge that can potentially counter the biased telling of Sri Lanka's history.

Conclusion

After many twists and turns of events, at the end of the novel Maali succeeds in holding an exhibition of his photographs. However, it is also seen that contrary to Maali's beliefs, his photos do not cause a momentous shift in the country's political scene. His photos do not attract a huge audience and are quietly taken away one by one; only the photos from the envelope titled "Ten," where he captured his most precious moments and the most beautiful parts of his country, are left hanging on display. The remaining photos portray the everlasting essence of Sri Lanka that transcends war and violence. Finally, Maali is seen to partake in a journey toward rebirth in the "River of Birth," a symbol of renewal for his character. Having fulfilled his role as witness, he is released from the cycle of violence and enters a new existence. Symbolically, this could also imply hope for Sri Lanka as a nation despite its history of suffering. This aspect of the novel symbolises that actions of a single individual may often not be enough to bring forth an overnight change in the world, and their attempts may seem futile in the long run. However, that does not mean their efforts or existence were meaningless.

Similarly, Karunatilaka's portrayal and criticism of Sri Lanka in a single novel will not change the socio-political state of the country either. However, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* has indisputable significance in opposing biased tellings of history. As the author believes regarding the potential impact of his novel, "I hope that it'll encourage more Sri Lankans to write about and unpack the past, and that a new generation of readers who've grown up with the internet will go back and read about histories that they're not taught in schools" (Karunatilaka, "The Third One"). This novel is Karunatilaka's attempt at contributing to the counter-narrative against state-sponsored falsified history. His work is a remarkable contribution to the body of knowledge that will make people view their understanding of history and

nationality in a new light. Moreover, through his anti-violence stance, the author also communicates that epistemological engagement is far more effective and likely to bring forth meaningful change contrary to violence. In the novel, Karunatilaka's inclusive approach to storytelling also allows his readers to sympathise with the victims of the chaos of the past. Therefore, the novel's purpose mirrors Maali's role in the story, although change is yet to come: "It's not nothing" (Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons* 300).

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