

Human Rights and Literature: A Study of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

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Abstract

This article examines the use of symbolic representations in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) to narrate the history of Human Rights (HR) violations. The article argues that the genre of fiction has emerged as a cultural medium for promoting the discourse of HR, moving beyond legal, judicial, and political forums. Building upon the concept of Human Rights Literature (HRL) developed by Pramod K. Nayar, the article conducts a critical analysis of the novel. It analyses 1) the use of fictional narratives to depict HR violations, 2) the role of language and cultural discourse that contribute to the dehumanization and demonization of people and massacres, and 3) how the discursive description of HR violations due to riots, civil war, and massacres transforms into a popular language of fiction. The article emphasizes the significance of fiction as a valuable addition to ethical literature within the HR movement and as a tool for spreading awareness.

Keywords: Human rights, Literature, Fiction, Dehumanization, Genocide

Introduction

Because, according to silly old you, the problem was that the folks in Colombo, London, and Delhi didn't know the full extent of the horror. And maybe clever young you could produce the photo that turned policymakers against the war. Do for Lanka's civil war what naked napalm girl did for Vietnam. (Karunatilaka 250)

Maali Almeida, an itinerant war photographer who worked for the Sri Lankan Army, foreign news agencies, and an NGO run by Tamils (Hoole), says the above lines. He wakes up dead at the opening of Shehan Karunatilaka's novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022) (Owolade). The life after death, or "afterlife" (Karunatilaka 4), is portrayed as a crowded and overwhelmed bureaucratic office that grants him seven moons (seven days) to unravel the mystery of his death and move on from the chaotic "In Between" (Karunatilaka 13). However,

Maali's primary concern is not solely investigating his death but also discovering what became of the photographs he took while covering war zones. He believes that "these are photos that will bring down governments. Photos that could stop wars" (6). He wants his photographs to symbolize the terror of war and promote the message of peace, just like the "napalm girl's" (Karunatilaka 250) photograph did during the Vietnam War. In 1972, during the last years of the Vietnam War, a photograph known as "The Napalm Girl" was published in newspapers and caused shockwaves around the world. The photo depicts a nine-year-old South Vietnamese girl running naked down a road to escape an American napalm attack. The girl's body was on fire, and she had her arms outstretched while her face twisted in pain. This image became an iconic representation of the horrors of war and a propagator of anti-war sentiments and peace across the world (Miller 261). Karunatilaka employs graphic depictions and descriptive language in the novel to reveal the disturbing realities of abductions, mass killings, torture, and riots in Sri Lanka during the 1980s. The author, like Maali, may have done this to raise global consciousness about the atrocities of war that his country underwent.

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida weaves facts and imagination to unravel the unresolved deaths of Sri Lankan citizens during the 1980s, one of the darkest periods in the nation's history. Karunatilaka conveys the story through the ghosts of slaughtered individuals with dismembered limbs and blood-stained garments. The majority of these are individuals who have suffered from ethnic, communist, and state-sponsored violence in Sri Lanka. The novel portrays their harrowing experiences of anti-Tamil riots and massacres committed by both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the army through descriptions of their worn and battered bodies. The story also recounts the victims of the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or People's Liberation Party, which launched a similar insurgency against the Sri Lankan government, killing many left-wing and working-class citizens along the way (Owolade). The novel uses symbolic representations such as ghosts, nightmares and dreams,

battered bodies, and war-torn landscapes to uncover the violent and devastating politico-cultural history of Sri Lanka. This kind of literature, which emphasizes the efforts to express, interpret, and convert symbolic representations to narrate the history of Human Rights (hereafter HR) violations, is termed Human Rights Literature (hereafter HRL) by Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Human Rights and Literature: Writing Rights* (2016) (Nayar, “Human Rights” 135). According to Nayar, the HRL brings to light the acts and processes concealed by hiding places of massacres and torture and by the absence of historical records. By exposing the subject of torture not only as a victim but also as a topic of discussion, such literature helps establish itself as a part of common knowledge, a shared vocabulary, and a topic that can be discussed openly. This allows for the circulation of information and ideas related to torture, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding and awareness of the HR issue (Nayar, “Human Rights” 148). He proposes “[...] to construct a cultural apparatus through which we, as sympathetic and interested members of civil society and the public sphere, talk about, debate and folklorize HR” (Nayar, “Writing Wrongs” 16). According to him, the “cultural texts and these debates (the responses to the cultural texts) together constitute the cultural apparatus of HR” (Nayar, “Writing Wrongs” 16).

Most of the literary works and criticism attempted to explain the unending cyclical violence as a result of exclusionist politics in Sri Lanka through the perspectives of postcolonial decadence (social, political, economic, and cultural corruption and instability) (Shaheen, Jajja, & Qamar 123–139), women and war (Karmakar 1–12), minority identity and nation-state (Fazal 163–176), separatism and democratic entitlement (Orentlicher 131–135), separatism and majoritarianism (Segura 1–10), religion and territorialization (Senanayake 300–305), and so on. The gap in this area is the lack of sufficient research on post-colonial literary texts that depict the postcolonial world’s conditions from the HR perspective. Specifically, there is a significant dearth of critical work that analyzes *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* as HRL.

Despite the growing interest in HR as a field of study, there has been limited attention given to the examination of postcolonial literature from this perspective. This presents a gap in the research that needs to be addressed, particularly in postcolonial literary texts exploring issues related to violence and social injustices. Such research could contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which literature can serve as a tool for promoting HR and could also help illuminate the role of literature in social and political struggles. McClennen and Slaughter claim that “in the past two decades (the 1990s-2000s, emphasis added), human rights have provided a preferred language for statements about morality and immorality, claims about justice and injustice” (1). Therefore, the novel can be examined as a “cultural apparatus of Human Rights discourse” (Nayar, “Postcolonial Affects” 17) and how the language of fiction translates legal standards of rights into a cultural and literary language.

HRL emphasizes the circumstances that lead to the loss of subjectivity, including the breaking of bodies and the imposition of loss and indignities. These texts are concerned with how individuals are situated within their environments to examine the conditions that prevent them from maintaining their autonomy, coherence, and agency as a subject (Nayar, “Human Rights” 1). Nayar states HR novels typically include three key elements to understand and document violence: Firstly, they use fictional narratives to depict HR violations, drawing on real historical events to authenticate the accounts. Secondly, they examine the language and cultural discourses that contribute to the dehumanization and demonization of targeted individuals or communities. And thirdly, they often depict graphic and disturbing images of the aftermath of such violations, including the bodies of those who have been raped, beaten, tortured, and killed. The study of HR abuses in works of fiction represents a paradigm shift. This demonstrates that HR debates have moved beyond legal, judicial, and political forums and are now being explored in cultural texts, including fiction (Nayar, “Postcolonial Affects” 4). This article focuses on how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* functions as a tool for

promoting HR and as a cultural medium for spreading awareness about it. It starts by discussing the historical and political events that led to the violations of rights depicted in the novel. It then examines how ethnonationalism and various political, cultural, and religious discourses dehumanize and demonize certain groups, resulting in a decline in democracy, an increase in illiberalism, and a resurgence of bloodlust. The paper also looks into the novel's vivid portrayals of the genocidal incidents in the language of fiction. Finally, the article emphasizes the significance of this literary work as a valuable addition to ethical literature within the HR movement.

History: Metatextual and intratextual

Pramod K. Nayar, while theorizing the HRL, observes that both “metatextual” (information outside of the text) and “intratextual” (information within the text) materials are crucial in ensuring the authenticity of fictional representations of HR violations. Metatextual information serves as a framework that supports the personal stories being narrated within the text, rather than being a mere cover-up. Historical details and cultural discourses regarding ethnicity, race, religion, and sexuality also become a part of the personal storytelling within the novel (Nayar, “Human Rights” 80–81). The tragic killing of a war photographer and a gay man named Maali Almeida is the central story that the novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* tells us. It is set against Sri Lanka's complex and violent socio-political and cultural history. The author delves into the complex web of factors that played a role in Maali's tragic murder. These include the historical tensions and conflicts between various ethnic and linguistic groups in Sri Lanka and the destabilizing influence of political instability and interference from external forces. The novel also explores the impact of cultural norms and prejudices, such as the societal rejection of homosexuality in Sri Lanka, which may have contributed to Maali's mysterious death.

Karunatilaka repeatedly problematizes “independence” of Sri Lanka in 1948 by raising the question, “[h]ow does 1948 sound to you? Auspicious or suspicious?” (Karunatilaka 139). The novel examines how the controversies over indigeneity and belongingness split the country into fragments. The majoritarian demography claimed that the land historically and culturally belonged to them, while minorities stood for their rights as equal citizens. The text records the impact of rising ethnonationalism in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of independence, which led to conflicts to establish or maintain ethnic sovereignty. It renders this conflict the cause of the emergence of multiple spaces of violence. Sri Lanka was initially celebrated as a democracy with a bright future for social and economic progress. However, as time passed, a rise in politics promoted exclusivity and micro-nationalism in the northeast of the island nation (Sabhlok 24). Since its independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has seen varying levels of violence in the form of ethno-religious riots, insurgencies, and civil war. Between the 1950s and early 1980s, the island nation witnessed big anti-Tamil riots, pushing the country towards segregation. The early 1970s and late 1980s saw horrific left-wing insurgencies aimed at destabilizing governments (DeVotta, “The Lost Quest for Separatism” 1027–1030; “Island of Violence” 167; “Promoting Covenantal Pluralism” 52–53). According to Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology, Sri Lanka belongs to Sinhalese Buddhists, and giving equal rights to minorities at the cost of the majority community’s suffering is unjustifiable. Therefore, following independence, elected majoritarian governments brought some policy changes that were taken as exclusionist politics to disempower the Christian, Muslim, and Tamil minorities. The 1956 election and the subsequent passing of the *Sinhala Only Act* imposed the Sinhala language as the only official language, removing English and Tamil (DeVotta, “Promoting Covenantal Pluralism” 52–53). The *Dead Bodyguard* criticizes the *Sinhala Only* programme by calling it the “Führer of Sinhala Only. Godfather of every shitstorm” (Karunatilaka 135). Führer is a German word that means leader. But the word symbolically represents Nazi leader Adolf Hitler (Britannica,

“Führer” para. 1). The “Führer of Sinhala Only” (Karunatilaka 135) that targeted the Tamil minorities is compared here with the anti-Jewish campaign launched in Germany under Hitler. It is called the “Godfather of all shitstorms” (Karunatilaka 135), as this opened the door for the emergence of violence in the newly democratic environment, which started as a series of riots and interethnic conflicts and culminated in a full-fledged war that lasted from the early 1980s to the late 2000s and claimed more than 100,000 lives (Gerharz & Pfaff-Czarnecka 625).

The fiction unfolds itself like detective fiction, “in which a crime is introduced and investigated, and the culprit is revealed” (britannica.com, “Detective story” para. 1). The story revolves around the ghost of Maali, who comes back to find out the details of his murder, including the identity of the person who killed him and the reasons behind it. In HRL, the dead often becomes the narrator, as the most certain “characteristic of much literary fiction around HR violations is the death or ‘muting’ of the victim-witness” (Nayar, “Human Rights” 149). Maali Almeida, who “has a knack for being in the wrong place” (Karunatilaka 82), witnesses the dark corners and chambers of the war-torn country and documents the brutal war crimes through his camera. Hence, he has also been killed. While unravelling the mystery of his death, the story sheds light on the mass killings of Sri Lankan people during the 1980s. Through the lens of a war photographer and journalist, the story delves into the complex layers of ethnic conflicts in modern Sri Lanka. The investigation-like narrative centres around five confidential envelopes titled “Ace,” “King,” “Queen,” “Jack,” and “Ten” (32–33). Four of these confidential envelopes contain photos taken by Maali from the war front while working for the British Embassy (represented by Jonny Gilhooley), a Tamil NGO (represented by Elsa Mathangi), the Special Task Force, or STF (represented by STF chief Raja Udugampola), and the envelope titled Jack has photos of JVP violence. The fifth envelope, with the title Ten, contains pictures taken of Maali’s lover DD (Dilan Dharmendran) and “Sri Lanka at its prettiest” (Karunatilaka 33). Therefore, the titles written on the envelopes imply that “...Johnny

is Ace, STF is King, Elsa is Queen, Jacks are JVP” (Karunatilaka 230). The photos are the chief sources that gradually reveal the massacres’ topography and the conflict’s different stakeholders. These envelopes are projected in the novel as the evidence and chief documents of the turbulent history of the island nation, which is also a history of grim violations of individual rights.

The photos inside the envelope titled Ace take us through the LTTE training camps in Vavuniya. It focuses on children, “uncles, grandmas, farmers, cowherds and schoolteachers, all loading rifles and firing at targets [...]” (Karunatilaka 192). The perspective of people from the camp conveys that these people joined the militant group to protect themselves from the atrocities of the Sri Lankan army. They are found to be saying, “[w]e fear the army more than we fear them (LTTE terrorists). The army burned our village” (Karunatilaka 192). The photos reveal the cruel reality of the army’s attack on the LTTE camp, where “seventy Tamil civilians were killed in the Omanthai massacre. There were children bleeding in front of me” (Karunatilaka 194), as uttered by Maali. These images show the armed recruits of the LTTE from Omanthai town (in the North Sri Lankan district of Vavuniya) who are trained to safeguard themselves from the army offensive. However, a second perspective of the army units under Major Udugampola sees the training camp as an oppression of civilians by the terrorist group. It legitimizes its attack on the camp and the killing of a number of people. According to Amnesty International, at least 3,000 Tamils are believed to have perished or “disappeared” in Amparai District alone between June and October (during 1990); many of them are believed to have been the victims of extrajudicial executions. Following the arrival of government troops, reports of widespread extrajudicial executions were also made in Batticaloa and Vavuniya (Amnesty International 2).

The envelope titled King contains the images taken by Maali for Raja Udugampola, the head of the STF formed by the government for covert counter-terrorism operations. The STF

funds the pictures for propaganda against the LTTE. These snapshots mostly include “captured Tiger grenades, rocket launchers, rifles and boots packed into crates with Hebrew and Arabic stamps. Scared little boys in uniform were huddling at the frontlines. The bodies at Valvettithurai were piled onto a pyre, the mass cremation [...]” (Karunatilaka 303). The images witness the massacres of innocent civilians conducted by state forces and Tamil militants for their own purposes. Valvettithurai is a coastal town in the Jaffna district (in the North Province). The account also explains how, in 1987, during the Akkaraipatu (Ampara district in the East Province) massacre, Udugampola “ordered the earth movers to dig graves large enough to bury villages in, then he made soldiers dress the bodies in Tiger uniforms and pose them. Then, he made you and the Lake House hacks take the photos” (Karunatilaka 249).

The photos in the envelope titled Queen “...feature the barbarism of India up north in ‘89, the cruelty of Tamils out east in ‘87, and the savagery of Sinhalese down south in ‘83” (Karunatilaka 305). The fiction recreates the ghastly images of the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, where the Sri Lankan Civil War was believed to have begun. The pictures make us see “the lady in the pink salwar being doused with petrol. The naked boy surrounded by dancing devils... 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 126). Elsa wants photos of the riots taken by Maali to hold the culprits (state and counter-state entities) responsible for the grave crimes. She tries to persuade him, saying, “[w]e have funding and a legal team. And we’re going after the murderers of 1983” (Karunatilaka 106). She considers the ruling political party of the time as the chief conspirator of the pogrom: “1983 was an atrocity. Eight thousand homes, five thousand shops, a hundred and fifty thousand homeless, no official body count. The Sri Lankan government has neither acknowledged nor apologized for it” (Karunatilaka 107). The reference to the incident here situates the causes behind the mass migration that occurred during and after the carnage and, subsequently, the emergence of new topographies

for mass murders in Sri Lanka. As a response to the killing of 13 soldiers by the Tamil separatists in the north, anti-Tamil riots broke out across the country (“Sri Lanka’s Black July”). That led to abductions, rapes, looting, tortures, and murders of Tamils where they were in small numbers. The sense of insecurity among Tamils about being a minority caused a mass migration towards the north and east of the country, where they were in the majority. The migration resulted in major demographic changes in the country, and the separatist movement gained more moral support and strength (“Sri Lanka’s Black July”). The envelope also has “...a picture of hospital beds piled with dead doctors and nurses, punished by the Indian Peace Keeping Force for the crime of treating wounded LTTE fighters” (Karunatilaka 127-128). This is a reference to the alleged massacre carried out by the IPKF in Jaffna, who fired at the hospital with heavy artillery, reportedly to flush out LTTE militants (“Return to Sri Lanka”).

The details in the photos clicked by Maali are fictionalized forms of official history documented by news media such as the BBC and international organizations such as Amnesty International. The metatextual materials authenticate the fictional photos documenting the infringement of human dignity in a significant part of Sri Lanka’s North Province (NP) and East Province (EP), which became fraught with violence. This conflict culminated in unrelenting violence and a state offensive against the insurgent ethnic groups at a high cost to civilians (Gerharz & Pfaff-Czarnecka 622). The recorded history of the civil war through the news media and international bodies serves as the metatextual information that supports Maali’s story and the stories of others in the novel whose bodies have been violated. Therefore, the historical details and cultural narratives about identity also become part of the personal storytelling within the novel. In addition to this, “these ‘scenes’ (both images and narratives) are sites where victims put forward themselves, their bodies, lives and deaths as a testimony to the absence of Human Rights for many people across the world” (Nayar, “Writing Wrongs” n.p.). The story records the massacres during the 1980s, with special emphasis on the

geography of the mass murders on the real map of Sri Lanka. In all the above descriptions of massacres, the author consciously puts the names of the locations, the victims, and the perpetrators behind them. The perpetrators include the radical Sinhala mob, IPKF, army, JVP, and LTTE, who have been involved in mass deaths in Jaffna, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Omanthai, Kokkilai, Akkaraipattu, Anuradhapura, and other places located in the North and East provinces of Sri Lanka. It also introduces eponymous characters to tell the stories of the murders of famous Sri Lankans, such as Rajani Thiranagama, characterized as Dr. Raneer, in the novel (Ganeshanathan 2). Therefore, fiction juxtaposes the real and the fictional and attempts to place itself into historical discourse while maintaining its independence as fiction.

Dehumanization, demonization, and genocide

Dawes argues that HR work is about telling stories that highlight the pain and suffering experienced by vulnerable individuals at the hands of other individuals, communities, and the state (Dawes 394). By using the legal framework of HR, these stories become cultural narratives that reveal the loss of identity, subjectivity, and bodily autonomy that people have experienced. In other words, the HR discourse is a way of narrating the stories of those who have been victimized, tortured, or killed (Nayar, “Human Rights” xi). The narrative of offences against the rights of individuals in HRL typically begins by focusing on serious incidents such as riots, massacres, or wars. The discussion then seeks to uncover the ways in which language, culture, and other forms of discourse contributed to the occurrence of such disasters. Nayar describes this process as involving the concepts of “dehumanization,” “demonization,” and “genocide/holocaust.” In HRL, the genocidal imaginary is most prominently expressed through the theme of dehumanization. It can be defined as a discourse that justifies the use of violence against civilian groups and imposes degrading attributes on individuals and entire groups in order to facilitate mass destruction, which is the defining feature of genocide (Nayar, “Human

Rights” xv-xvii). It argues that dehumanization allows individuals to commit extreme violence against helpless victims because it creates emotional detachment (Nayar, “Human Rights” 4).

In Karunatilaka’s novel, dehumanization is primarily linked to issues of indigeneity, identity, and sexuality. The novel frequently explores the concept of indigeneity to uncover how it is used to justify and perpetuate dehumanizing discourse. The characters in the novel engage in debates about the idea of indigeneity, which serves as a means of tracing the harmful consequences of using identity and indigeneity as pretexts for dehumanizing others. In the following remarks by the Dead Bodyguard, the discourse of dehumanization is evident:

‘Ceylon was a beautiful island before it filled up with savages.’

‘True. Some countries import their savages. We breed ours.’

‘You know there were people here long before the Sinhalese?’

‘Kuveni’s people?’

‘They weren’t considered people. We call them devils and snakes.’ (Karunatilaka 136)

The above conversation begins in search of an answer to the question, “...who were the indigenous Lankans?” (Karunatilaka 136) This answer is important for each dweller of the land since the “chronicle used to codify laws crafted to suppress all that is not Sinhalese and Buddhist and male and wealthy” (Karunatilaka 136). The discourse also tries to find the history of the Tamil minority in the land, about “...Tamil traditional homelands and how Tamils had kingdoms in the north throughout medieval history and colonial rule” (Karunatilaka 232). The idea of indigeneity, as evident in the above discourses, is a very controversial concept in South Asia, including Sri Lanka. There is no agreement over the conditions that may qualify a community as a bona fide citizen of the land. Despite being there before the arrival of many other communities, the discourse rejects the Kuveni people as “savages,” “devils,” and “snakes,” hence not genuine citizens. Like Tamils, those who came later to the land were also questioned as “original” citizens. The indigeneity question to certify an individual as a

deserving native is a form of violence or precedence to something more brutal. This is accomplished by creating a historical narrative that affirms the dominant ethnic community as the legitimate owner of the relevant land. Such a narrative denigrates all rivals, claiming they are historically or culturally unfit to rule the land or achieve political equality. However, these democratic institutions frequently discriminate against native or rival minorities. In the case of Sri Lanka, this is accomplished covertly by keeping such groups out of decision-making circles (Yiftachel 648–649). In the context of the novel, ethnic identity is depicted as a weapon to exclude, torture, and kill those perceived as a threat to the dominant ideology of majoritarian homogeneity. This ideology is linked to a Buddhist-Sinhala identity, and those who do not fit into this identity are targeted for violence. The novel shows how the idea of ethnic identity is manipulated to justify these actions, with those who are perceived as “other” being subjected to discrimination and violence. Similarly, one of the suspected reasons for Maali’s death has been his hybrid Sinhalese-Tamil identity. Maali knows the dangers of his identity, and for this reason, he probably asserts his national identity instead of his ethnic one:

‘Malinda, your mother is Tamil?’

‘Half-Burgher, half-Tamil.’

‘And your father?’

‘Passed away three years ago. He was Sinhala.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. So what are you?’

‘A Sri Lankan.’ (Karunatilaka 232)

He has been reminded over and over again that he is fortunate that his father has given him the Sinhalese surname, which is now providing him security. But unfortunately, his sexuality might have been the cause of his murder. He realizes the threat of being gay, very early in his life when his father tells him that “all poofs should be tied up and raped with knives, you looked

down at your slippers and never looked him in the face again” (Karunatilaka 24). The discourse of exclusion and dehumanization on the grounds of nationality, ethnicity, class, or sexuality is a crucial component of the continuum that leads to breaches of fundamental rights. Studies of past genocides, such as the Holocaust, have documented the ways in which the language used to describe certain groups of people preceded and accompanied acts of extreme violence. Dehumanization allowed the perpetrators to view their victims as faceless, monolithic groups rather than individuals with unique identities (Nayar, “Human Rights” xv).

The concept of dehumanization discussed in this context leads to a worse situation involving the demonization process. Demonization is a powerful act of subject-destroying identification in which one party has the power to identify another in a particular way. Nayar argues that this dehumanization involves two steps. The first step is collapsing all individuality into a general category. The second step is conceptualizing the category itself as non-identity. For example, the terms “leftist,” “terrorists,” or “poofs (homosexuals)” were used to describe individuals who did not fit within the orthodox cultural and national identity (Nayar, “Human Rights” 23). When the dehumanization is done, there is little difference left between demons, humans, or animals. The ghost of Sena Pathirana (JVP-er) says that “everyone claims non-violence. Except when it comes to mosquitoes or rats or roaches. Or terrorists. Then it is kill or be killed. As if some lives mean more than others, which, of course, they do” (Karunatilaka 244). Here Sena equated the individuals labelled as “terrorists” with mosquitoes, rats, and roaches. This comparison is made because those who are labelled as terrorists lose their sense of identity and subjectivity as human beings, which makes them easier to kill and treat as pests. Similarly, when Detective Cassim appears to be nervous and pained while going to dump the “garbage” (Karunatilaka 226) or the dead bodies, Ranchagoda tries to console him by saying: “No point of thinking so much. These are all terrorists and thugs” (Karunatilaka 226). Through such discourses, the novel highlights how the process of dehumanization and then

demonization allows for mistreatment and violence towards these individuals, as they are no longer seen as fully human.

Through these concepts of dehumanization and demonization, HRL shows how ethnically charged discourses classify and label specific communities as subhumans who don't deserve the rights offered by the state. Therefore, creating an environment where subjects lose their subjectivity subsequently allows circumstances that permit their identities to be taken away through the severing of their bodies and the infliction of suffering. And finally, massacres and other forms of gruesome execution could be used to carry out deportations, disappearances, expropriations, and genocides (Nayar, "Human Rights" 1-3). The concepts of human dignity and bodily integrity rely on physical violations, such as the threat of the body being broken or defiled, to be fully understood and recognized (Anker 4; Nayar, "Human Rights," xiii). Liberalism envisions the ideal human as an individual who possesses certain rights and inhabits a body that is always whole, self-sufficient, and inviolable. However, the notions of human dignity and bodily integrity paradoxically rely on physical violation and abuse for their full comprehension. This means that the discourses and norms promoting HR are paradoxically reinforced by images of bodily harm and degradation (Anker 4). Moreover, HRL portrays individuals who have lost their subjectivity, not as hopeless cases but as those who can regain it through the act of speaking out. This act of speaking out involves two aspects: first, narrating one's own experience of dehumanization through personal storytelling and self-witnessing, and second, bearing witness to the dehumanization of others who may not be directly visible. The process of witnessing is crucial in enabling these individuals to rebuild their subjectivity after undergoing confinement, torture, and dehumanization (Nayar, "Human Rights" 72).

Karunatilaka presents the history of the war in Sri Lanka in the voices of those whose bodies have been violated and who bear scars of loss, absence, and rejection. The narrative, using the character of Maali, incorporates the life experiences of numerous individuals who

have also died during the war. The pathetic condition is depicted through the voices of a “Dead Atheist” (Karunatilaka 12), a “Dead Revolutionary” (Karunatilaka 24), a “Dead Lawyer” (Karunatilaka 59), a “Dead Doctor” (Karunatilaka 87), a “Dead Bodyguard” (Karunatilaka 134), a “Dead Priest” (Karunatilaka 257), “Dead Suicides” (Karunatilaka 284), “Dead Tourists” (Karunatilaka 309), and so on. Hutcheon refers to a form of fiction that does not aim to provide an objective account of a nation-state’s history or a grand narrative. Instead, this form of fiction utilizes various voices and perspectives to narrate the stories of pain and suffering experienced by people and can be seen as a metafictional approach to historiography (Hutcheon, “Canadian” 230). The use of this approach in the novel presents multiple voices to highlight the disturbing images of the war from the perspective of HR discourse. The Dead Atheist, while answering the query of where Maali would find his dead body, says, “[t]he same place the flame goes when you snuff it...The mother and daughter buried under bricks in Kilinochchi, the ten students burned on tyres in Malabe, the planter was tied to a tree with entrails, none of them went anywhere” (Karunatilaka 12). The philosophic language and description of violence by the atheist reflect despair and horror. Similarly, Sena, the Dead Revolutionary, sarcastically expresses his disgust over the merciless killings of the revolutionaries in his “beautiful” (Karunatilaka 30) country. He says, “You think of your beautiful body being sliced by a cleaver. How ugly we all are when reduced to a meat. How ugly this beautiful land is...” (Karunatilaka 30). The ghoul of the Dead Lawyer says that she was burnt alive by a Sinhalese mob during the 1983 anti-Tamil riot. “In the flickering moonlight her skin looks made from snakes... her hair writhes like a nest of serpents, and the burns on her skin glow like embers” (Karunatilaka 61), but she is saved by a snake demon who gives her back her skin. However, she says, “I am not my skin” (Karunatilaka 61). Instead, she wants to know how she may gain her “dignity” and “self-respect” back (Karunatilaka 61). All

these discursive descriptions of anguish and helplessness against the brutalities mirror the opposite of the HR regime and are conveyed through emotional outcry.

Nayar argues that victims of violence and abuse in HRL assert their rights by expressing intense emotions rather than relying on legal debates about equality and justice. Because many victims are not able to effectively communicate in the language of the law within a courtroom setting, their emotional narratives must serve as an alternative form of truth-telling. They are not able to provide a logical argument or supporting evidence; they can only present their own experiences and the pain they have suffered (Nayar, “Postcolonial Affects” 15). Dr. Ranee, a very important character in the story, claims, “Sri Lanka was the first democracy to produce the modern death squad, building on models developed by Latin American dictatorships” (347–48). The death squads worked to wipe out dissent and pieces of evidence for war crimes by the government agencies and to punish the rebels in torture cells. The torture cell, which is run by Raja Udugampola, is described as putting some light on the dark corners of the state:

In Room One, two men in masks were beating a boy with pipes. In Room Two, a boy was strapped to a bed and shrieking. In Room Three, two boys were hung upside down with bags on their heads. In Room Four, a man in a surgical mask and tinted glasses was leaning over a man in a chair. (Karunatilaka 256)

The quote provides insight into the corrupt and dangerous practices of powerful institutions within the government, revealing how they contribute to the transgression of civil liberties. In doing so, the novel highlights the importance of understanding the institutional mechanisms and socio-institutional vulnerabilities that led to these violations, including torture. This requires a deep dive into the stories of those who have experienced these violations to fully comprehend the reality of the situation. The act of witnessing goes beyond simply listening to the survivors’ accounts of their experiences, and extends to exploring the hidden and often dark archives of the world, in order to expose the truth and bring about justice (Nayar, “Human Rights” 99).

Conclusion

HR is often viewed as an idealistic aspiration for what should be available to all human beings. However, in order to comprehend what constitutes “human” and “human rights,” it is crucial to grasp the opposing notions. In the novel, acts of violence such as abductions, custodial tortures, mob lynching, and massacres are portrayed as the opposite of the utopian HR vision. This article explores how the narrative of the novel operates at the intersection of history and fiction. The fictional storytelling of the victims is complemented by metatextual information that supports and validates the personal stories being narrated within the text. The article highlights how social, cultural, and political narratives are often manipulated to dehumanize and demonize individuals or communities that do not conform to the dominant concept of ethnic, national, or gender identity. This dehumanization strips them of their rights and allows for their bodily autonomy, integrity, and dignity to be violated without any consequence. The article shows how the principles of HR are imagined as a counter to these cultural and narrative constructs of dehumanization and demonization.

In conclusion, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* serves as a powerful HRL that translates the ethics of rights into cultural discourse, making it accessible for mass consumption. The novel transforms the images of HR infringements and historical information into the language of literature, allowing for a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of complex HR issues. By involving the legal narratives of HR within cultural texts like fiction, the novel creates a space for dialogue and reflection on important political and social conflicts. Moreover, the novel tactfully shifts the debate around nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality into the discussion of rights, highlighting the importance of acknowledging and protecting the fundamental rights of all human beings. “Who is a Sri Lankan” debate gradually turns into

“who is a human” discussion. The novel’s message of recognizing everyone as human, regardless of their identity, is a powerful and important contribution to HR and literature.

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