



## Journey from Nihilism to Hope: A Study of the Seven Moons of Maali Almeida

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### ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:* Futility, Nihilism, Dark humour, Disillusionment, Death, Memory, Optimism

*Received :* 5 January

*Revised :* 23 February

*Accepted:* 23 March

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### ABSTRACT

The novel opens with a tone of nihilism as Maali begins his journey in the afterlife, marked by confusion and futility. "You wake up with the answer to the question that everyone asks. The answer is Yes, and the answer is Just Like Here But Worse" (44). Set against Sri Lanka's civil conflict and its violent aftermath, it explores the afterlife while critiquing political corruption, social decay, and war's brutality. The narrative follows Maali Almeida, a war photographer navigating the liminal space between life and death. It initially portrays the futility and chaos of violence, reinforcing a bleak worldview. However, as Maali progresses through his "seven moons," a counterpoint to this bleakness emerges. The story gradually reveals purpose, redemption, and a fragile hope, despite despair. Karunatilaka employs magical realism, dark humour, satire, and political commentary to show this transition. Through structure, character, and symbolic motifs, the novel explores suffering, memory, and healing in post-conflict societies. It offers a nuanced perspective on transformation after conflict

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## INTRODUCTION

Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is a profound exploration of Sri Lanka's turbulent history. The novel is set against the backdrop of the country's civil war and its lasting consequences. It masterfully blends metaphysical mystery with magical realism, dark humour, and political satire. Through vivid storytelling, it captures the chaos, violence, and corruption that defined this period. At the centre of the narrative is Maali Almeida, a war photographer. After his untimely death, he finds himself trapped in a liminal afterlife. Here, he is granted seven moons—seven days—to uncover the identity of his killer and the motives behind his murder. His journey is not just about solving a mystery. It becomes a deeper exploration of power, morality, and the fragility of human life. The novel delves into themes of nihilism, existential dread, and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world. Maali's experiences reflect the struggles of a nation torn apart by violence and betrayal. Yet, amidst despair, the story also hints at hope. It questions whether redemption and healing are possible in a fractured society. At its core, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is more than a supernatural thriller. It is a meditation on memory, justice, and the lingering ghosts of history. Through Maali's journey, Karunatilaka compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about war, loss, and the human desire for closure.

### Background Information

Sri Lanka's civil war, which spanned decades from 1983 to 2009, was marked by significant violence, displacement, and human rights violations. The conflict was rooted in ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority. It left an enduring legacy of trauma, loss, and political instability. As a nation, Sri Lanka has struggled with reconciliation and accountability. It continues to grapple with the scars left by years of war. Literature emerging from this context often reflects the complexities of this history. It offers narratives that address collective grief, memory, and the search for justice. Karunatilaka's novel, while set within this socio-political landscape, transcends a mere recounting of historical events. By weaving together, the metaphysical and the political, it offers a unique lens. This lens helps in understanding the enduring impact of conflict on individuals and societies.

### Research Problem

At the core of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is a tension between despair and hope. Maali's character is shaped by his experiences as a war photographer. He embodies a profound nihilism that reflects a disillusionment with humanity and society. However, his journey in the afterlife suggests the possibility of transformation and redemption. This raises critical questions. How does Karunatilaka portray Maali's progression from nihilism to hope? In what ways does the novel use this personal journey as a metaphor for broader societal healing? How do narrative techniques and symbolic motifs contribute to this thematic exploration? This study seeks to address these questions. It examines the interplay between personal and collective struggles within the novel.

### **Objectives or Purpose**

This study aims to analyse the progression of Maali Almeida from nihilism to hope within the afterlife. It explores how the narrative structure and symbolic motifs reflect themes of redemption, truth, and reconciliation. Its objective is to situate the novel's themes within the socio-political context of Sri Lanka to highlight its commentary on resilience amidst suffering. By focusing on these objectives, the study seeks to unravel the layers of meaning within *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It aims to illuminate how Karunatilaka uses Maali's story to address universal questions about humanity, morality, and the search for purpose.

### **Thesis Statement or Hypothesis**

Karunatilaka uses Maali Almeida's journey in the afterlife as a metaphor for the search for redemption, purpose, and healing. The novel demonstrates that even in the aftermath of profound trauma, there exists the possibility of hope and reconciliation. Through Maali's progression, the novel explores the transformative power of truth and the human capacity to confront and overcome despair.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature can address complex histories. It fosters dialogue about reconciliation and healing. By examining the interplay between personal and collective struggles within *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, it highlights the ways in which narratives provide insight into the human condition. These narratives also explore the processes of coping with trauma. The study underscores the significance of magical realism and metaphysical elements. These elements represent experiences that may be too painful or complex to capture through conventional storytelling. By situating the novel within the broader context of Sri Lanka's history, this analysis provides a framework. This framework helps in understanding how literature can engage with political and social realities while also offering a vision of hope and transformation.

### **Structure of the Paper**

The paper is organized into five sections. The first section provides an overview of the socio-political backdrop of the novel and its narrative framework. It situates *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* within the context of Sri Lankan literature and history. The second section focuses on Maali Almeida's character development. It examines how his progression from nihilism to hope reflects broader themes of redemption and healing. The third section explores symbolic motifs such as photography, water, and the afterlife. It analyzes how these elements reinforce the novel's central themes. The fourth section situates the narrative within the broader socio-political context of Sri Lanka. It highlights the novel's commentary on reconciliation and resilience. The conclusion reflects on the novel's broader implications. It considers the understanding of the human condition and the possibility of finding hope amidst suffering.

By addressing these aspects, this paper seeks to illuminate the richness and complexity of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It demonstrates its relevance

not only as a work of fiction but also as a lens through which to understand the challenges and possibilities of healing in the aftermath of trauma.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of existentialism, nihilism, and Sri Lankan literature helps contextualize *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Scholars have examined existentialist philosophy, the portrayal of nihilism, and the political realities in Sri Lankan fiction. These perspectives offer insights into Karunatilaka's novel, which explores death, the afterlife, and the search for meaning in a war-torn society.

Kenneth N. Douglas (1947) in "The Nature of Sartre's Existentialism" analyzes Sartre's ideas on freedom, absurdity, and authenticity. These concepts shape Maali's journey through the afterlife, where he confronts moral ambiguity and personal responsibility. Joseph O'Mara (1951) in *The Meaning and Value of Existentialism Studies* expands on existentialist thought. His work helps explain Maali's liminal existence and the consequences of his past choices. Charles I. Glicksberg (1948) in "The Literature of Existentialism" explores themes of alienation and absurdity in literature. Maali's entrapment between life and death, along with the novel's dark humour, aligns with existentialist traditions. Basil Fernando (2016) examines nihilism in Sri Lankan consciousness. He argues that the country's history of violence has shaped a pervasive sense of disillusionment. Karunatilaka's novel critiques the civil war's legacy, reinforcing Fernando's claim that prolonged conflict fosters futility and despair. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke (1992) in "Sri Lanka's 'Ethnic' Conflict in Its Literature in English" discusses how Sri Lankan writers address political and personal trauma. Karunatilaka follows this tradition, depicting Maali's life as a war photographer and the political motives behind his death. Morgan Meis (2012) in *The Teardrop of the Subcontinent: A Tour of the Literature of Sri Lanka* surveys Sri Lankan literature, emphasizing themes of identity, loss, and resilience. His work places *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* within a literary tradition that grapples with national trauma and historical memory.

These sources provide a broad understanding of Karunatilaka's novel. By integrating existentialism, Sri Lankan history, and literary traditions, the novel explores nihilism, memory, and redemption. This review highlights how *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* engages with these themes, offering fresh insights into trauma and transformation in post-conflict societies.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the journey from nihilism to hope in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. It utilizes textual analysis, thematic exploration, and critical discourse analysis to investigate how Shehan Karunatilaka constructs this transition through narrative techniques, symbolism, and character development.

### Research Approach

The study is primarily interpretative, drawing on existentialist and postcolonial literary theories. It engages with philosophical perspectives on nihilism and hope, particularly in the context of war and trauma. Secondary

sources, including scholarly articles and critical essays, provide a framework for analysing the novel's engagement with historical and socio-political realities.

### **Methods of Analysis**

- Textual Analysis – A close reading of the novel identifies key narrative structures, stylistic choices, and character arcs that reflect the transition from nihilism to hope.
- Thematic Exploration – The study categorizes and examines major themes such as death, redemption, memory, and political critique.
- Symbolic Interpretation – Recurring motifs, including the moons, water, and photography, are analysed for their role in shaping the protagonist's transformation.
- Comparative Analysis – Insights from existentialist literature and Sri Lankan fiction are integrated to contextualize the novel's philosophical and socio-political dimensions.

### **Data Collection and Sources**

Primary data consists of the novel itself, while secondary sources include academic articles, books, and critical reviews. JSTOR, Google Scholar, and institutional archives are used to gather relevant literature.

### **Limitations**

This study focuses on literary and thematic analysis rather than empirical research. The interpretation is subject to theoretical perspectives and may not encompass all potential readings of the novel. By combining literary analysis with philosophical and socio-political critique, this methodology provides a comprehensive approach to understanding Karunatilaka's depiction of nihilism and hope.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This study reveals a complex and nuanced exploration of the themes of nihilism and hope in Shehan Karunatilaka's novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*. Set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's protracted civil conflict and subsequent political turmoil, the novel employs the protagonist's metaphysical journey through the afterlife as a powerful allegory for broader existential questions. Through this narrative device, Karunatilaka delves into profound issues concerning the nature of violence, the meaning of existence, and the potential for redemption. While the novel serves as a scathing critique of the senselessness and brutality inherent in war and political violence, it simultaneously introduces the possibility of redemption and hope, even within the most desolate and seemingly hopeless contexts. This duality of nihilism and hope forms the core of the novel's thematic exploration, providing a rich terrain for critical analysis.

It is set in a liminal space that is neither entirely real nor fully fantastical, allowing the author to craft a narrative that bridges both the historical realities of Sri Lanka's violent past and the existential and spiritual dilemmas faced by individuals.

The creative writers in English found July 1983 and the later escalation of strife to the proportions of a civil war in the North and East of the country a traumatic new experience (like their earlier experience of the 1971 insurgency) which they were impelled to express and interpret, even if they were unable to come to terms with it. (Goonetilleke, 1992: 451)

The protagonist, Maali Almeida, is a war photographer who, after his untimely death, finds himself navigating an afterlife that is as chaotic and confounding as the world he left behind. This afterlife is depicted as a bureaucratic purgatory, filled with endless queues, obscure regulations, and faceless authorities – an environment that mirrors the absurdities and futility of existence, especially in a war-torn society. The novel's setting is crucial in establishing the overarching theme of nihilism, a philosophical stance that is characterised by a rejection of inherent meaning or value in life. "Existentialism expresses the extreme of nihilistic despair..." (Glicksberg, 1948: 231) Like an existentialist work it is a "realistic presentation of human situations, in which part stress is laid upon the sordid and seamy side of life and in which reality is identified with some central, root experience-such as a revulsion, despair-from which spring all the surface manifestations and in terms of which a man's current behaviour and predicaments are to be ultimately explained". (O'Mara, 1951: 11) The intertwining of historical and cultural layers could lead to a nihilistic outlook – where meaning and hope seem elusive. "There is something deeply negative and nihilist imbedded into the Sri Lanka consciousness. By 'Sri Lankan consciousness' I mean the consciousness of all Sri Lankans ... What is common to all is a deep negativity inherited from the far distant past." (Fernando, 2016)

The novel begins with the existential cry: "You wake up with the answer to the question that everyone asks. The answer is yes, and the answer is Just like Here but Worse." (10) It touches on a philosophical or existential question, likely what is the meaning of life? or "What comes after death? Karunatilaka's portrayal of this liminal afterlife serves as a reflection of Maali's psychological landscape, shaped by his exposure to human suffering. Initially, Maali's experiences in this purgatorial realm are marked by a profound sense of disillusionment and despair, resonating with the existentialist idea that life is ultimately devoid of inherent meaning or purpose. Sartre's slogan, "Existence precedes essence" meaning that we are born without a set purpose (Douglas, 1947: 244). We first exist, and only later do we create who we are through our actions, decisions, and experiences. Unlike an object (like a chair) that is made for a specific purpose, humans aren't born with a fixed purpose – we define ourselves over time. This is amplified by the bureaucratic nature of the afterlife, which reflects the absurdity and senselessness of the socio-political landscape in Sri Lanka during and after the civil war. The narrative seems to align with a nihilistic worldview, where the randomness of death and the chaos of human existence are portrayed as fundamentally meaningless. "It is a day you wake up hungover and empty of thought, which is true of most days. You wake up in an endless waiting room" (10). It suggests a sense of confusion or emptiness, not just physically but mentally, as if life itself is a blur. The "endless waiting room" metaphor reinforces this idea of being stuck in a state of limbo or transition, with no clear direction or

purpose. His frequent references to traumatic event during the Sri Lankan Civil War are full of despair. Mullaitivu, located in the northern part of Sri Lanka, was a site of heavy conflict. Being “stuffed in a bunker of terrified parents and screaming children” places Maali in the heart of fear and chaos (11). This experience likely left him with emotional scars and a sense of helplessness, as he was caught in a brutal conflict at a young age.

However, as the novel progresses, Karunatilaka gradually shifts the narrative from this state of existential despair toward a more hopeful outlook, suggesting that even within such a bleak and absurd reality, there remains the potential for meaning, redemption, and transformation. Maali Almeida's journey through the afterlife becomes emblematic of a deeper quest for self-understanding, moral clarity, and ultimately, redemption. His interactions with other souls—those he loved, wronged, or betrayed in life—serve as critical moments of introspection and self-reckoning, challenging his initial nihilistic perspective and opening the possibility for growth and change. The narrative's transition from nihilism to hope is not straightforward; it is fraught with moral ambiguities and the necessity of confronting one's past actions and choices.

Sri Lanka, like many post-colonial nations, inherited a range of challenges upon gaining independence, with ethnic tensions being among the most significant. During British rule, divisions between ethnic groups, particularly between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, were exacerbated by colonial policies that favoured one group over the other at different times. The British often employed a “divide and rule” strategy, manipulating these differences for administrative convenience, which left deep social rifts that worsened after their departure. According to Morgan Meis, “Sri Lanka was left with all the usual post-colonial problems: including ethnic tensions equally stoked and manipulated by the departing British.” (2012: 243)

Karunatilaka uses various narrative techniques, such as magical realism, dark humour, and political satire, to navigate the tension between Nihilism and hope. The incorporation of magical realist elements allows the author to blend the surreal with the real, creating a space where existential questions can be explored without the constraints of traditional narrative realism. The “seven moons” that Maali is granted to solve the mystery of his death and come to terms with his life serve as a structural device that mirrors his emotional and spiritual evolution. Each “moon” represents an opportunity for Maali to confront his past, seek reconciliation, and determine whether his life—and, by extension, death—can possess any semblance of meaning.

The significance of the novel's symbolic motifs, such as photography, water, and the afterlife itself, illustrates the tension between nihilism and hope. Photography, in particular, is portrayed as a means of capturing truth and resisting the erasure of memory, standing in stark contrast to the chaos and confusion that characterise both the living world and the afterlife. “My hearing is fine. I take photos. I bear witness to crimes that no one else sees. I am needed.” (14) Water, recurrently depicted in the narrative, symbolises the potential for cleansing and renewal, as well as the ever-present danger of being overwhelmed

by despair. The rich tapestry of symbols within the novel provides a framework through which Karunatilaka articulates a vision of hope that is neither simplistic nor naive but is rather grounded in the painful process of coming to terms with the complexities of human experience.

This novel can be interpreted as a profound commentary on the possibility of finding hope and meaning amidst seemingly insurmountable suffering and loss. Karunatilaka's narrative suggests that while the nihilistic aspects of existence cannot be ignored, there is also room for transformation, redemption, and the search for a better, more just world. This study's discussion will therefore be organised around several key themes that emerge from the novel, supported by close readings, symbolic analysis, and contextual exploration, providing a comprehensive understanding of how Karunatilaka masterfully balances the interplay between despair and optimism.

### **Nihilism in the Afterlife: A Journey into Meaninglessness**

At the outset of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the protagonist, Maali Almeida, is thrust into a perplexing and ambiguous afterlife that defies traditional notions of heaven, hell, or purgatory. This afterlife, conceived as a bureaucratic and almost dystopian realm where souls wait in endless queues and grapple with convoluted paperwork, serves as a stark metaphor for the absurdity and futility of existence itself. In this realm, the dead are subjected to the same arbitrary rules and senseless procedures as the living, amplifying the absurdities of both life and death. This depiction aligns with a deeply nihilistic worldview that reflects Maali's initial state of mind. Through this portrayal, Karunatilaka introduces a universe that appears fundamentally meaningless, where the existential struggle to find purpose is starkly evident.

Maali's character, shaped by the cumulative trauma of his career as a war photographer, is initially overwhelmed by profound disillusionment and despair. His profession, which involves capturing images of human suffering and documenting the grotesque realities of war, has exposed him to the worst of humanity. This exposure has left him with a cynical outlook, suggesting that both life and death lack inherent meaning. Karunatilaka's depiction of Maali's psychological landscape closely aligns with existentialist literature, which grapples with themes of alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe. Within this framework, Maali emerges as a quintessential existential protagonist, alienated from both society and himself.

The bureaucratic nature of the afterlife in the novel can be interpreted as an extension of the senseless bureaucracies characterising modern life, particularly in conflict-ridden and politically unstable societies. The endless queues and arbitrary rules reflect a world where order is imposed without reason, trapping souls in a perpetual cycle of waiting and questioning. This depiction mirrors the absurdist traditions of existential literature, where characters are often ensnared in futile systems that erode their sense of agency and meaning. The portrayal of the afterlife as such suggests that death offers no respite from the chaos of life but merely extends it into another realm, equally devoid of purpose.

Karunatilaka's narrative style, blending dark humour with surrealism, further underscores this nihilistic vision. The novel's tone, marked by irony and a willingness to confront the grotesque and absurd, forces readers to confront the meaninglessness of the world it portrays. The humour, often bleak and biting, accentuates the futility and absurdity of Maali's situation, highlighting the inherent contradictions and paradoxes of the human condition. This narrative approach resonates with existential writers such as Albert Camus and Franz Kafka, who similarly employed absurdity and irony to explore existential dread and the search for meaning.

However, Maali's character is not static; his nihilistic perspective, which dominates his early experiences in the afterlife, begins to shift as he interacts with other souls – both those he loved and those he wronged in life. These interactions become pivotal moments in the narrative, challenging Maali's assumptions about life, death, and the possibility of meaning. His encounters with mother, former lovers, and victims of war prompt introspection and self-reflection, leading him to reconsider his beliefs about existence and the human experience.

One significant shift in Maali's outlook occurs through conversations with his mother, who represents a more traditional and spiritually orientated view of life and death. Her presence and attempts to guide Maali towards resolution and peace introduce a counterpoint to his nihilism. These dialogues open a space for considering alternative viewpoints that challenge Maali's – and the reader – understandings of life and death. These moments of connection and conflict between Maali and his mother illustrate the tension between nihilism and the human desire for meaning, suggesting that even amidst absurdity, there is room for reflection, growth, and change.

Similarly, Maali's encounters with former lovers, particularly those he betrayed or disappointed, force him to confront the moral and ethical ambiguities of his life. These interactions, fraught with tension and unresolved conflicts, compel Maali to grapple with the consequences of his actions and the pain he inflicted on others. This introspective journey is crucial in understanding how the novel transitions from despair to potential hope. Karunatilaka suggests that moving away from nihilism involves an honest engagement with one's past and an acknowledgement of one's flaws and failures.

Additionally, Maali's evolving understanding of his photographs' role in the living world contributes to this shift. Initially viewing his work as futile, Maali eventually recognises his photographs as potential vehicles for truth and justice. This realisation introduces a glimmer of hope, suggesting that even in a world rife with suffering and chaos, moments of art and truth can make a difference. This development marks a shift from nihilistic acceptance to a cautious belief in the possibility of making a meaningful impact.

The progression of Maali's character from nihilism to tentative hope mirrors the broader themes of the novel, which challenges readers to confront the complexities of human existence. Karunatilaka does not offer simplistic resolutions but presents a world where hope and despair coexist, where redemption is a process rather than an endpoint, and where the search for

meaning is marked by ambiguity and contradiction. This complexity is reflected in the novel's narrative structure, which fluidly moves between past and present, the living and the dead, and the real and surreal. By blurring these boundaries, Karunatilaka invites readers to consider the interconnectedness of these states and their mutual influence.

Moreover, the use of magical realism in the novel further complicates the binary between nihilism and hope. The afterlife is depicted as a dynamic realm where different realities intersect, allowing for nuanced exploration of existential questions. This blending of the real and fantastical enables a symbolic representation of Maali's journey, using motifs such as water, light, and darkness to represent shifting boundaries between despair and redemption.

The theme of nihilism in the afterlife in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* drives both the narrative and Maali's character development. Maali's journey into meaninglessness reflects his life experiences and unresolved traumas. However, his interactions with others, reflections on his past, and growing awareness of his photographs' impact introduce the potential for moving beyond nihilism. Karunatilaka's novel thus offers a complex meditation on the human condition, suggesting that while the search for meaning is fraught with uncertainty and despair, transformation and hope remain possible. This transition is neither linear nor straightforward but requires deep engagement with the self, others, and the larger forces shaping human existence.

### **Magical Realism as a Framework for Existential Exploration**

Magical realism plays a crucial role in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, serving as a bridge between the thematic extremes of nihilism and hope. By seamlessly blending elements of the real and the fantastical, Karunatilaka creates a narrative space where the protagonist's journey from despair to hope is both conceivable and deeply resonant. This narrative technique not only enhances the novel's thematic depth but also allows for a more nuanced exploration of existential questions and personal transformation.

In the novel afterlife is depicted through a lens of magical realism that transcends conventional boundaries between life and death. Instead of presenting a traditional view of the afterlife as either a reward or punishment, Karunatilaka constructs a setting that is simultaneously familiar and otherworldly. The bureaucratic, dystopian nature of the afterlife – characterised by endless queues, forms, and regulations – serves as an allegory for the chaos and absurdity of Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape. This setting enables Karunatilaka to critique not only the senselessness of violence but also the inefficacies of institutional systems that perpetuate human suffering and injustice. By blurring the lines between the real and the fantastical, the novel creates a space where the protagonist's existential struggles are vividly represented. The afterlife is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in Maali's journey, reflecting his internal turmoil and the broader socio-political turmoil of Sri Lanka. This blending of the real and the imaginary allows Karunatilaka to explore profound themes such as the nature of existence, the search for meaning, and the possibility of redemption in ways that might not be possible within the constraints of strict realism.

A pivotal narrative device in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is the concept of the “seven moons.” This device functions as both a structural and symbolic element, representing stages in Maali’s emotional and spiritual transformation. Each moon signifies a distinct phase in his journey, providing opportunities for reflection, revelation, or failure. This progression is emblematic of traditional literary journeys, where characters undergo a series of trials and tribulations to achieve growth, enlightenment, or redemption. The “seven moons” serve as a countdown, marking the passage of time and the protagonist’s evolution. Each moon represents a critical juncture in Maali’s journey through the afterlife, offering a space for him to confront his past, make amends and grapple with existential questions. The cyclical nature of the moons reflects the ongoing struggle between nihilism and hope, with each phase presenting new challenges and insights that contribute to Maali’s eventual transformation. The symbolic significance of the moons extends beyond Maali’s personal journey, reflecting broader themes of time, memory, and the possibility of change. By framing Maali’s journey within this cyclical structure, Karunatilaka emphasises that personal and societal transformation is an ongoing process, marked by both setbacks and progress. This structure mirrors how individuals and societies grapple with historical trauma and seek to move beyond it, suggesting that redemption and hope are attainable even amid profound despair.

Karunatilaka’s use of magical realism also highlights the potential for personal agency and transformation, even in the most absurd and seemingly meaningless situations. The fantastical elements of the afterlife provide Maali with opportunities for introspection and growth that would not be available within the confines of a strictly realistic narrative. By engaging with the surreal and the magical, Maali confronts his past actions, understands the impact of his work, and reevaluates his beliefs about life and death. The surreal aspects of the afterlife, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and the presence of other souls with unresolved issues, create a space where Maali’s personal struggles are magnified and explored in depth. This environment allows him to grapple with existential questions and moral dilemmas in ways that reveal deeper truths about his character and the human condition. The magical realist elements thus act as a catalyst for Maali’s transformation, enabling him to move beyond his initial nihilistic perspective and embrace the possibility of redemption and hope.

The integration of magical realism in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* effectively bridges the thematic gap between nihilism and hope, offering a vision of existence that encompasses both despair and the potential for change. By combining elements of the real and the fantastical, Karunatilaka creates a narrative space where the protagonist’s journey is both a reflection of his internal struggles and a commentary on broader social and historical issues. The novel’s use of magical realism allows for a nuanced exploration of existential themes, highlighting the interconnectedness of personal and societal transformation. The afterlife, with its surreal and bureaucratic nature, serves as a microcosm of the world Maali left behind, reflecting the complexities of human experience and the ongoing search for meaning. Through this lens, the novel suggests that even in

the most absurd and seemingly meaningless situations, there is room for personal agency, growth, and hope. Magical realism in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* plays a vital role in bridging the themes of nihilism and hope, providing a framework through which the protagonist's journey can be both plausible and profound. By blending the real with the fantastical, Karunatilaka creates a narrative that engages with existential questions and offers a vision of transformation and redemption. The use of magical realist elements not only enhances the thematic depth of the novel but also allows for a more complex and resonant exploration of the human condition. Through this approach, the novel invites readers to consider the possibility of meaning and hope even in the face of overwhelming despair.

### **Redemption and the Possibility of Hope**

In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, a pivotal turning point in the narrative occurs when Maali Almeida undergoes a profound realisation regarding the role of his photographs. Initially, Maali's work as a war photographer seems emblematic of profound futility and despair. Although his images document the brutal realities of conflict, they appear to lack the power to effect change in the face of pervasive corruption and violence. However, as Maali navigates the afterlife, he begins to perceive his photographs not merely as artefacts of his profession but as potential vehicles for truth and justice. This shift in perspective introduces a critical dimension to the narrative, underscoring the potential for redemption and societal change through the act of witnessing and bearing witness.

The motif of photography in the novel transcends its role as a mere profession, evolving into a symbol of memory, truth, and resistance against collective amnesia. Throughout the narrative, Karunatilaka employs Maali's photographs to explore the themes of witnessing and remembering. In a society where the horrors of war are often suppressed or forgotten, Maali's photographs stand as a testament to the truth of human suffering and the injustices that have transpired. This realisation signifies a significant departure from Maali's initial nihilistic outlook, as he begins to acknowledge that his work holds the potential for a purpose beyond mere documentation.

The concept of hope in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is portrayed as intricate and multifaceted, rooted in the painful process of confronting one's past actions and their consequences. Unlike simplistic or sentimental depictions of hope, Karunatilaka presents hope as emerging from a profound engagement with truth and memory. Maali's interactions with the souls he encounters in the afterlife are crucial in this process. These interactions compel him to confront his moral failings, the ambiguities of human behaviour, and the impact of his actions on others. Through these confrontations, Maali is driven to grapple with the ethical and emotional complexities of his past, ultimately leading to a more nuanced understanding of hope and redemption.

One of the most significant aspects of Maali's journey is his growing awareness of the importance of preserving and sharing his photographs. As he engages with other souls in the afterlife, including those he has wronged or loved, he realises that his work has the potential to resist the erasure of collective

memory. By ensuring that his photographs endure and reach the living, Maali aims to provide a powerful testament against corruption and violence. This shift in focus from self-preservation to the preservation of truth reflects a broader theme in the novel: the idea that hope arises not from forgetting or romanticising the past but from an honest and courageous engagement with it.

Maali's interactions with his mother and former lovers are particularly illuminating in this regard. His mother, who embodies traditional values and spiritual beliefs, challenges Maali to consider the impact of his work beyond his immediate concerns. Her presence in the afterlife serves as a reminder of the moral and ethical dimensions of Maali's actions, urging him to reflect on the legacy he will leave behind. Similarly, his encounters with former lovers and victims of his photographs force him to confront the personal and moral repercussions of his work. These interactions are not merely moments of reflection but are integral to Maali's process of reconciling with his past and finding a path toward redemption.

The novel's portrayal of hope is thus deeply intertwined with the theme of memory and the struggle against collective amnesia. By focussing on the preservation and dissemination of his photographs, Maali seeks to ensure that the truth of his experiences and the suffering he has witnessed are not lost or obscured by time and political expediency. This act of resistance against forgetting becomes a potent symbol of hope, suggesting that even in the face of overwhelming despair, there is potential for change and justice through the preservation of truth and the courageous confrontation of one's past.

Karunatilaka's depiction of hope is also reflected in the novel's narrative structure and style. The blending of magical realism with a realistic portrayal of war and its aftermath creates a narrative space where hope and despair coexist. The fantastical elements of the afterlife provide a context for Maali's transformation, allowing him to engage with his past in ways that are both imaginative and profound. The cyclical nature of the "seven moons" serves as a framework for his journey, illustrating the ongoing struggle between nihilism and hope and emphasising that redemption and meaning are achieved through a continuous process of reflection and growth.

In conclusion, the role of photography in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is central to the novel's exploration of hope and redemption. Maali's realisation of the potential of his photographs to serve as vehicles for truth and justice represents a significant turning point in his journey, marking a shift from nihilism to a more complex and nuanced understanding of hope. The novel portrays hope not as a simplistic or naive sentiment but as a profound engagement with truth, memory, and the consequences of one's actions. Through Maali's interactions with other souls and his focus on preserving and sharing his work, Karunatilaka presents a vision of hope rooted in the courage to confront the past and resist collective amnesia. This approach highlights the potential for personal and societal transformation, even amid overwhelming despair, and underscores the enduring power of memory and truth as sources of hope.

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is a profound exploration of the delicate balance between despair and optimism. By employing a narrative that blends magical realism with stark political commentary, Karunatilaka crafts a story that is both a searing critique of nihilism and a cautious embrace of hope. Through the protagonist's journey in the afterlife, the novel not only provides a space to reflect on the horrors of war and the complexities of human behaviour but also offers a pathway toward redemption and healing. This study has demonstrated that the novel's power lies in its ability to present hope not as a simplistic resolution but as a complex, hard-earned process that requires confronting uncomfortable truths and fostering collective memory.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* adeptly navigates the tension between nihilism and hope through its imaginative narrative and surreal depiction of the afterlife. Karunatilaka's use of magical realism serves as a potent allegory for existential and socio-political struggles, transforming the afterlife into a space that amplifies Maali Almeida's journey from disillusionment to redemption. Initially, Maali's experience in the afterlife mirrors his deep-seated cynicism as a war photographer, exposing a bureaucratic and dystopian realm that underscores the futility of existence. His photographs, which once appeared powerless, evolve into symbols of truth and justice. This pivotal shift occurs as Maali begins to recognise the potential of his work to challenge corruption and preserve memory. The motif of the "seven moons" structures Maali's journey, symbolising stages of emotional and spiritual growth. Each moon provides moments of reflection and revelation, guiding Maali through a process of self-examination and moral reckoning. This cyclical progression emphasises that hope and redemption are achieved through continuous engagement with truth rather than through denial or forgetfulness. Karunatilaka presents hope as a complex and multifaceted concept, grounded in the confrontation with the realities of one's past and the impact of one's actions. Hope emerges not from simplistic sentiment but from a profound engagement with truth and memory. Maali's commitment to preserving and sharing his photographs represents a resistance against collective amnesia and a dedication to justice. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* bridges nihilism and hope, offering a narrative that critiques existential despair while affirming the potential for redemption. Through its innovative use of magical realism and the nuanced portrayal of Maali's journey, the novel underscores that even in the face of profound despair, hope and transformation remain possible through courageous engagement with the past.

## FUTURE STUDY

This research still has limitations so further research is needed related to the topic of Journey from Nihilism to Hope: A Study of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* to perfect this research and increase insight for readers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I express my deepest gratitude to those who have contributed to the completion of this study. First and foremost, I extend my sincere thanks to my brother for his invaluable guidance, insightful feedback, and constant encouragement throughout this research journey.

I am also grateful to Vignan University for providing access to essential resources, libraries, and research materials that have supported my analysis of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*.

A special note of appreciation goes to my peers and colleagues for their thought-provoking discussions and support, which have enriched my understanding of Shehan Karunatilaka's work.

Lastly, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my family and friends for their unwavering patience, motivation, and belief in my academic pursuits. Without their encouragement, this work would not have been possible.

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