From Brain Text to the Final Text: Karunatilaka's Ethical Consciousness in Constructing Brain Text

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Abstract: Brain text is a central concept in ethical literary criticism. Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, developed from two earlier drafts, *The Devil's Dance* and *Chats with the Dead*, illustrates the author's process of constructing brain text. Karunatilaka employs magical realism, blending the backdrop of Sri Lanka's civil war with elements of Eastern mythology, enabling readers unfamiliar with Sri Lankan culture to grasp its core themes. This reflects the author's ethical balance between cultural universality and historical authenticity. Furthermore, in the transition from brain text to written text, Karunatilaka makes complex ethical choices, depicting the brutality of war and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals caught in the tide of history. The struggle between Maali Almeida's rational and irrational wills represents not only a personal psychological conflict but also a broader pursuit of social justice and historical truth. Lastly, by exploring the tension between personal identity and societal expectations, Karunatilaka probes into intricate ethical dilemmas. The novel intertwines individual struggles with wider socio-political conflicts, revealing the multidimensional nature of moral decision-making within specific cultural and historical contexts.

Keywords: Shehan Karunatilaka; *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*; *Chats with the Dead*; brain text; ethical consciousness

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标题：从脑文本到终稿：论卡鲁纳蒂拉卡脑文本建构中的伦理意识

内容摘要：脑文本是文学伦理学批评的核心术语。谢汉·卡鲁纳蒂拉卡的布克奖获奖小说《马里·阿尔梅达的七个月亮》由《魔鬼之舞》和《与逝者聊天》两个稿本发展而来，展现了作者建构脑文本的过程。作者利用魔幻现实主义手法，将斯里兰卡的内战背景与东方神话元素结合，使得对斯里兰卡文化不熟悉的读者也能理解其核心内容，体现了其在文化共通性和历史真相之间的伦理平衡。在解码脑文本为书写文本时，作者进行了更为复杂的伦理选择，呈现了战争的残酷，描绘个体在历史洪流中的道德困境。马里·阿尔梅达的理性意志与非理性意志之间的博弈，不仅是个人的心理挣扎，也是对社会正义和历史真相的追求。最后，通过个人身份与社会期望之间的张力，卡鲁纳蒂拉卡深入探讨了其小说创作复杂的伦理困境。他将个人斗争与更广泛的社会政治冲突交织在一起，展现了伦理选择在特定文化和历史背景下的多维性。

关键词：谢汉·卡鲁纳蒂拉卡；《马里·阿尔梅达的七个月亮》；《与逝者聊天》；脑文本；伦理意识

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Shehan Karunatilaka, author of the 2022 Booker Prize-winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, created this work through a series of extensive revisions, beginning with earlier drafts titled *The Devil's Dance* and *Chats with the Dead*. Karunatilaka has described his intent as ensuring that the novel could be understood by "a person who knows nothing about Sri Lankan and Eastern mythology" (Charles). His iterative process reflects what Nie Zhenzhao and Wang Yong (2019) describe as "a way of expressing the literary brain text that is preserved in the brain" (167). Despite the importance of these transformations, few scholars have explored the three manuscripts as a continuum, or examined how Karunatilaka's evolving creative materials, motivations, and psychological perspectives contribute to his work's ethical depth. His construction of "brain text" reflects his exploration of historical truth and universal human ethics, imbuing the novel with dimensions of moral reflection and historical insight that go beyond narrative. The manuscripts' progression highlights an ethical framework within his literary creation, where the author's revisions reveal an increasing commitment to cultural accessibility, moral inquiry, and ethical storytelling.

Critics have engaged with the novel's themes, narrative techniques, and its

exploration of memory, war, and human rights, noting how it presents "a very enjoyable combination of literary, political-ethical challenge, enjoyment, and recognition" (Boyagoda). However, these ethical themes are even more pronounced when we consider the revisionary journey across all three manuscripts. This paper aims to compare *The Devil's Dance*, *Chats with the Dead*, and *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* within the framework of ethical literary criticism, focusing on brain text construction and ethical issues. Through this lens, the study seeks to elucidate why Karunatilaka continually refined his manuscripts, framing these revisions as an ethical and creative response to the demands of both narrative clarity and universal accessibility.

From Brain text to Written Text: Karunatilaka's Three Manuscripts

The concept of "brain text" is central to ethical literary criticism, defined as "the result of the human brain's perception, cognition, understanding, and thinking of things in the form of memory" (Nie, "The Forming Mechanism of Brain Text and Brain Concept in Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism" 30). In his creation process for *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Shehan Karunatilaka's progression from conceptualization to written draft illustrates the formation of brain text. The following will explain the role of brain text in shaping the final version of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by examining the specific and significant differences among the three versions. These differences highlight the evolution of the novel's core ideas and themes as they underwent refinement, guided by the author's creative choices. By analyzing thematic emphasis altered in each version, we can better understand how the brain text served as a dynamic framework for Shehan Karunatilaka's revisions.

Karunatilaka described his creative process as involving extensive research and reflection before starting to plot, noting in an interview, "I spent a lot of time researching and imagining before I began plotting"(Menon). He compared his earlier work, *The Devil's Dance*, to "a dense, impenetrable jungle," where he scattered ideas without much restraint—writing, as he put it, "like a bad gardener and just scattering seeds wherever I felt" (Menon). For *Chats with the Dead*, however, he adopted a more disciplined approach, starting with the story and character development and carefully envisioning the afterlife setting. This enabled him to construct a more focused and coherent narrative, refining ideas from *The Devil's Dance* into a more streamlined, ethical narrative that retained only the best elements.

The Devil's Dance, which remained stored in Karunatilaka's mind as brain

text for seven years, embodies this process of iterative refinement. "Without brain text, individuals cannot speak or write" (Nie, "The Scientific Turn of Humanities Studies" 568). His creative approach resonates with the principles of ethical literary criticism, wherein "the concept of brain is constantly combined and modified according to certain ethical rules, and the form of this conceptual combination evolves during revision" (Nie, "The Forming Mechanism of Brain Text and Brain Concept in Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism" 33). Thematically, *The Devil's Dance* addresses the horrors of reality and the haunted souls that wander post-conflict from the afterlife's perspective. This tone—both grim and whimsical— evolves in *Chats with the Dead*, which builds upon the dark humor and surrealism of its predecessor to examine the deeper, lingering effects of Sri Lanka's civil war. In it, war photographer Maali Almeida pieces together the mystery of his own death, grappling with the moral ambiguities of war, the afterlife, and the nature of memory.

The final revision, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, reworks *Chats with the Dead* into a clearer and more impactful narrative. Notably, Karunatilaka's use of magical realism in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* weaves together the backdrop of Sri Lanka's civil war with Eastern mythological elements, enriching the novel with detailed depictions of Sri Lankan afterlife culture. This approach balances cultural universality with historical authenticity, allowing readers unfamiliar with Sri Lankan culture to grasp its essential themes. Across the three versions of this manuscript, Karunatilaka's choices reflect an evolving ethical intention, shaping the narratives to deepen their ethical resonance and cultural accessibility for a global audience. In the early manuscript, *Chats with the Dead*, Almeida's tasks are brief and direct, while in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Karunatilaka expands upon these scenes, adding nuanced descriptions of the afterlife:

> [...] a queue weaves around pillars and snakes along the walls. The air is foggy, though no one appears to be exhaling smoke or carbon dioxide. It looks like a car park with no cars, or a market space with nothing to sell. The ceiling is high and held by concrete pylons placed at irregular intervals across a sprawling yard. What appear to be large lift doors mark the far end and human shapes crowd in and out of them. (5)[1]

Karunatilaka's choice to expand his scenes with intricate descriptions of the afterlife

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[1]   See Shehan Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, London: Sort of Books, 2022. All references are to this edition will be cited hereafter in parentheses.

can be understood as a sophisticated act of brain text construction. Karunatilaka, a diasporic writer, channels his memories and ethical reflections on Sri Lanka's civil war through a carefully constructed brain text, resulting in a narrative that deftly navigates the dual expectations of representing Sri Lanka authentically to a global audience while resisting reductive portrayals of his homeland.

This deliberate brain text creation allows Karunatilaka to transform personal and collective memory into a layered representation of post-war trauma, using the afterlife as an allegorical space where unresolved conflicts and human suffering continue to haunt his protagonist, Maali Almeida. The detailed descriptions of the afterlife reflect not only Karunatilaka's immersion in Sri Lankan culture but also his ethical choices as a writer tasked with portraying the complexity of his homeland's history. By anchoring this brain text in elements of Sri Lankan mythology, Karunatilaka circumvents the "burden of representation" (Salgado 6) that many diasporic writers face, as he doesn't merely recount historical events but reconstructs them through a deeply ethical, culturally resonant lens. Karunatilaka's brain text construction thus avoids the critique of "expatriate culture" or "selective historicization" (Salgado 6) which authors like Ondaatje and Gunesekera have faced. Instead, it enables him to engage with Sri Lanka's conflicted past in a manner that is intellectually rich and emotionally resonant, while eschewing politically prescriptive narratives. By presenting a multifaceted exploration of Sri Lanka's civil war through the character's experience in the afterlife, Karunatilaka's brain text reveals not only the horrors of the past but also the ethical complexities of human memory, trauma, and resilience, offering a narrative that deepens understanding while preserving the integrity of his personal and cultural vision.

Besides, Karunatilaka employs language and imagery that are both universal and transcendent, enabling readers from diverse cultural backgrounds to empathize with and grasp the moral conflicts and historical context of the story. This deliberate choice in language and imagery reflects the author's ethical considerations in transforming complex cultural and spiritual concepts into a form accessible to a broader audience. By using universal expressions, Karunatilaka seeks to overcome cultural barriers, allowing more readers to engage with and reflect on Sri Lanka's history and present realities. Take the endings of *Chats with the Dead* and *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* as example, one specific difference that makes the latter more accessible to readers unfamiliar with Sri Lankan Eastern culture is how the second ending downplays the culturally specific imagery of the afterlife and focuses instead on more universal themes of moral reckoning and justice.

In *Chats with the Dead*, the original ending leans heavily on Sri Lankan

spiritual concepts, particularly the idea of the "yama rāja" (the Buddhist Lord of Death) and the journey through the afterlife. Almeida, engages with spirits, rituals, and cultural references deeply embedded in Sri Lankan Buddhism and Hinduism. For example, when Almeida interacts with spirits who seem to reference the cycle of samsara (rebirth), the narrative requires the reader to grasp concepts of karma and reincarnation, which may be unfamiliar or inaccessible to those not versed in Eastern spirituality. This is particularly illustrated in Almeida's conversations with the dead who comment on his karmic burden: "Oblivion made more sense than heaven or rebirth or living the same sad life over and over" (Karunatilaka 15). In contrast, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* reworks the metaphysical journey into a more universally relatable exploration of personal accountability and redemption. While the framework of the afterlife is still present, it is less tied to specific religious imagery. Instead, the ending focuses on Maali's quest to expose the truth about the violence he witnessed as a photojournalist, emphasizing his desire for justice for the victims of war. For instance, in the second ending, the focus is on Maali's effort to get his photographs to the living in order to reveal atrocities, which is a more concrete and universal act of seeking justice. The line, "photographs were the best way to end the war" (380) reflects a drive that any reader, regardless of cultural background, can understand—the quest for truth and accountability in the face of violence and corruption.

The transformation of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* from a reference to Eastern spiritual traditions into a metaphor for the stages of Almeida's reckoning with his own moral choices also makes the story more accessible. The seven moons represent the time Almeida has in the afterlife to confront his past, not as part of a specific religious journey, but as part of a personal and moral awakening. This shift away from karma and reincarnation allows the ending to center on the protagonist's self-reflection and agency, themes that resonate broadly with readers of various backgrounds.

Decoding Brain Text: The Ethical Choices of Maali Almeida

At the novel's outset, Maali Almeida awakens to find himself dead, with no memory of how or why he died, or who was responsible. He has seven nights, or "moons," to unravel the mystery of his death. Karunatilaka creates a "third world" of parallel space-time, enabling Almeida's ghost to traverse locations whenever someone speaks his name, bridging realms to uncover the truth and seek passage to the next life. Through Almeida's stream-of-consciousness narration, the novel highlights Sri Lanka's wartime turmoil and shows us the protagonist's ethical choices. "What kind

of brain text one possesses determines what kind of person they become" (Nie, "The Forming Mechanism of Brain Text and Brain Concept in Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism" 33). In other words, "the more positive brain text a person accumulates, the more likely they are to make ethical and morally sound choices" (Su and Xiong 53). In this sense, Almeida's ethical choices are closely tied to his brain text, as his attitude toward war is shaped by the brain text formed through his experiences and understanding of it.

Karunatilaka's approach reflects Nie Zhenzhao's concept of "brain text," where writers continuously modify ideas in line with ethical considerations, a process of "composition and modification" (Nie, "The Forming Mechanism of Brain Text and Brain Concept in Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism" 33). These choices shape *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* into an exploration of war's impact, seeking to dismantle barriers to understanding, particularly for readers unfamiliar with Sri Lankan culture. As a Sri Lankan author, Karunatilaka brings authenticity to the narrative by choosing a war photographer Maali Almeida as his protagonist, whose mission is not only to solve his own murder but to expose the brutal realities of war.

Maali Almeida's ethical choices expose the atrocities of conflict, uncover historical truths, and illustrate the moral complexities faced by individuals. Almeida's inner conflict between rationality and irrationality is not just a personal struggle, but a pursuit of justice and truth in a chaotic historical landscape. Through *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Karunatilaka captures the enduring weight of war and individual resilience, offering readers a profound reflection on ethics and the human spirit. Before the civil war, Sri Lanka was often portrayed as the "pearl of the Indian Ocean," known for its pastoral landscapes and reputation as a tropical paradise. Its central Highlands, dotted with vast tea plantations, evoke a sense of tranquility and natural beauty. Economically and politically, Sri Lanka was viewed as a model democracy with promising potential for social and economic progress. At the time of independence in 1948, it was considered "a success story in the developing world. A robust economy, a significant welfare state" (Biziouras 1). However, as a multi-ethnic society characterized by distinct languages and religious beliefs, Sri Lanka's ethnic diversity has also been a source of profound tension. Over time, "the rise of political movements "fostered exclusivity and micro-nationalism, particularly in the island's northeastern region" (Sabhlok 24). The eruption of ethnic conflict between the Tamil and Sinhalese in 1983 plunged Sri Lanka into decades of ethnic and religious strife, marked by riots, rebellions, and a brutal civil war.

These choices are reflected in the novel's portrayal of war's brutality, its uncovering of historical truth, and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals amid

turbulent times. "The function of literature is to teach moral values by praising virtue and punishing vice. Its ultimate aim is to answer the questions of how to put natural will and free will under the control of rational will" (Nie, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection" 392). While making ethical choices, human beings put themselves "in the mutual inhibition of human factors and animal factors, natural emotions and moral emotions, rational will and irrational will" (Ren 739). The interplay of Maali Almeida's rational and irrational wills symbolizes not only a personal psychological conflict but also a broader pursuit of social justice and historical accuracy. This inner conflict reveals a profound ethical awareness in the writing. According to ethical literary criticism, irrational will is defined as "the irrational driving force behind all feelings and actions is shaped by various mental factors such as emotion, consciousness, illusion, the subconscious, and inspiration. It also includes motives, desires, beliefs, habits, and instincts—elements that lie beyond the control of rational thought" (Nie, "Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism" 251). This irrational will manifests in Almeida's fearful imaginings and impulse to escape the horrors of war, while his rational will allows him to confront the truth of war's nature and resist his urge to flee. In *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, Almeida's changing attitude toward the war is divided into two distinct phases: before and after death. While alive, he viewed the war as a financial opportunity, taking photographs for the Sri Lankan military, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and international organizations. However, upon returning as a ghost to investigate the cause of his death, he begins to reexamine the immense suffering inflicted on the people by all sides of the conflict. One vivid scene describes this realization:

> It was an hour after the last shell had dropped and the air was still smoky and smelly. You stumbled through dust and saw the wailing. You could not hear it, because your ears were abuzz with the low hum at the end of the world, the frequency that spirits swirled at, the white noise of a thousand screams. But all around you, you saw the wailing. People had stopped running and were rooted to the spot, staring at the heavens and roaring. (298)

This moment ignites a sense of purpose in him: "These are not holiday snaps. These are photos that will bring down governments. Photos that could stop wars" (14).

Ethical literary criticism posits that "rationality is the ability to make accurate judgments and value assessments within a specific context, and it is the virtue that sets humans apart from animals" (Nie, "Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism"

252-253). This rationality, as defined within the framework of ethical literary criticism, consists of three key elements: cognition, value judgment, and moral behavior. Cognition refers to the individual's ability to perceive and understand reality; value judgment is the assessment of what is right or wrong based on that perception; and moral behavior is the subsequent action taken in alignment with ethical principles. Together, these elements form the foundation of rationality, guiding individuals toward ethical decision-making and moral responsibility in the face of complex situations. Maali Almeida, embodies both human and animalistic tendencies, reflecting the duality of human nature as understood in ethical literary criticism. Initially, Almeida's involvement in the war is motivated by a pragmatic, even opportunistic approach. He exploits the conflict for financial gain, taking photographs for various factions without concern for the broader implications of his actions. In this phase, his cognition is limited to survival and self-interest, with little regard for the moral consequences of his choices. He is driven by instinct and impulsive desires, which align with what ethical literary criticism term "irrational will"—the unconscious, emotional, and often self-serving motivations that steer human behavior when reason is absent. However, after his death, Almeida undergoes a profound transformation in his understanding of the war. As a ghost, he revisits the scenes of violence and suffering that he once documented so casually. His cognition shifts from a narrow focus on personal gain to a broader awareness of the human cost of the conflict. This shift in perception leads to a reevaluation of his past actions, prompting him to reassess the ethical implications of his work. The horror he witnesses—described vividly as "the white noise of a thousand screams" and the sight of people "rooted to the spot, staring at the heavens and roaring" (298)—awakens in him a sense of moral responsibility.

Through this process of reevaluation, Almeida begins to exercise value judgment, recognizing that his previous detachment from the war's atrocities was not only morally flawed but also complicit in perpetuating the violence. His new awareness drives him to reconsider the role of his photographs—not merely as tools for profit or fame but as powerful artifacts that can expose the brutal reality of war to the world. He now sees his photographs as potential catalysts for change, capable of "bringing down governments" and "stopping wars." This marks a crucial development in Almeida's moral behavior, as he shifts from passive observer to active participant in the ethical struggle against war's inhumanity.

In this way, Karunatilaka uses Almeida's transformation to explore the ethical dimensions of human cognition and the potential for moral growth. By aligning his protagonist's journey with the principles of ethical literary criticism, the novel

highlights the importance of rationality in overcoming irrational impulses and making ethical choices in the face of moral dilemmas. Almeida's story becomes a testament to the power of cognition, value judgment, and moral behavior in shaping not only individual actions but also broader social and historical truths. Through his newfound commitment to exposing the horrors of war, Almeida exemplifies the role of the ethical individual in challenging the irrationality of violence and injustice, using reason and moral clarity to reveal the truth hidden beneath the chaos of conflict.

Reconstructing Brain Text: Karunatiraka's Ethical Consciousness

These choices shape how Karunatilaka presents the cruelty of war, reveals historical truths, and portrays the moral dilemmas faced by individuals swept up in the current of history. As it is reveled in ethical literary criticism that "the task of literature, accordingly, is to depict how ethical relationships and moral order undergo changes, examine their consequences, and ultimately provide experience and lessons emerging from human life for the progress of human civilization" (Nie, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory" 190). The tension between Maali Almeida's rational and irrational wills represents more than just an internal struggle; it embodies a pursuit of social justice and historical truth. This interplay of motives and decisions underscores Karunatilaka's profound ethical awareness throughout the creative process.

Through the second-person narrative and the perspective of Maali Almeida, the author delves into the ethical relationship between individuals and society, the moral dilemmas of war, the preservation and disclosure of historical memory, and other complex issues. This approach highlights the intricacies of human nature amid political and wartime turmoil, emphasizing the importance of uncovering historical truth. While second-person narration is not a mainstream choice in novels, both *Chats with the Dead* and *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* employ this narrative technique, immersing readers in Almeida's stream of consciousness and mental activity.

From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, "the inner monologue, stream of consciousness, and psychological activities of characters in literary works, as well as the expression and rhetoric used to describe characters—such as metaphor, puns, and ellipses—are all ways to connect characters with brain texts for analysis" (Nie, "Ethical Literary Criticism and the Brain Text: Academic Dialogue Between Nie Zhenzhao and Wang Yong" 173). In both versions of the novel, *Chats with the Dead* and *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the changes in plot, including additions

and omissions, are closely linked to the protagonist's internal reflections and monologues. These elements ultimately reveal the author's ethical consciousness.

In the chapter "The Seventh Moon" of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, particularly in the sections titled "A Thousand Moons," "The River of Births," and "Your Prices," Karunatilaka made significant adjustments. In *Chats with the Dead*, Karunatilaka employs a relatively brief conclusion to the scene where the ghosts of PLN Marxists storm the minister's office and set off bombs. Almeida's journey in the afterlife, alongside the ghosts of victims, highlights the intertwining of personal relationships and broader socio-political issues. The characters' struggles for justice reflect a collective ethical consciousness that transcends individual concerns, pointing to a shared responsibility in confronting systemic violence. Almeida interprets the meaning of rational communication as he debates with Senna and his followers, striving to save the "innocent people." This suggests that "the chances of violence ending violence are one in nothing, one in nada, one in squat" (323). However, Almeida's exchanges, communications, and debates build bridges of reconciliation, culminating in a form of reconciliation with dead Marxists, Sinhalese, and Tamils: "the Dead Atheist saluting you and the Snake Lady laughing with her mob. You see the Dead Dogs howling from the bus stand, the Dead Suicides jumping off roofs and the drag queen waving at you mid-jump" (356).

This reconciliation is also reflected in Maali Almeida's handling of his own death, or more precisely, in how the revised narrative raises profound questions about moral responsibility in the face of cruelty. Karunatilaka explores the tension between vengeance and forgiveness, urging readers to reflect on their ethical stances amidst widespread violence and injustice. The novel begins with Almeida's search for the cause of his death, and as a civil war narrative, readers might initially assume his death is connected to his role as a war photographer, profiting from the images of conflict. Ironically, however, it is not his dangerous work but his identity as a gay man that leads to his death, highlighting the limited tolerance of homosexuality in certain sections of Sri Lankan society. The scene between Maali Almeida and Stanley Dharmendran highlights the moral and emotional complexities of Almeida's relationships, particularly the tension between personal desires and broader ethical responsibilities. In both *Chats with the Dead* and *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the second-person narrative structure helps the reader become intimately involved in Almeida's moral dilemmas, blurring the line between "you" (Almeida) and the reader. The perspective intensifies the confrontation between Almeida and Stanley, emphasizing the power dynamics and personal stakes in their interaction.

The narrative explores the clash between personal identity and societal

expectations. Stanley, as the father of Almeida's lover, represents the rigid and conservative social structures of Sri Lankan society, particularly with his disgust toward Almeida's homosexuality. Almeida, on the other hand, challenges Stanley's traditional values and refuses to conform to the moral judgments imposed on him. This tension is heightened when Stanley tries to buy Almeida off, offering him money to leave Dilan's life. Almeida's refusal and his sarcastic responses reflect his resistance to the commodification of relationships and the attempt to control love and human connection through material means. Karunatilaka uses this confrontation to underscore the broader socio-political issues intertwined with personal struggles. Stanley's position of power, both politically and personally, symbolizes the larger forces of corruption and repression that Almeida has fought against as a photographer documenting the horrors of the Sri Lankan civil war. The bodyguards, the thugs, and the threats of violence that Stanley wields against Almeida represent the systemic violence and authoritarianism Almeida has encountered throughout his life.

Karunatilaka uses this blending of the physical and the metaphysical to emphasize the complexity of moral and ethical choices. Almeida's sarcastic responses to Stanley and his ultimate commitment to Dilan reveal his deep understanding of the value of human connection, even in the face of death and societal rejection. The contrast between Stanley's ruthless pragmatism and Almeida's defiant idealism highlights the central ethical tension in the novel: the struggle between the forces of love, empathy, and human connection, and the forces of power, control, and repression.

Toward the end of the novel, the focus shifts from broader national and political struggles—such as the family and national grievances of the Sri Lanka People's Liberation Front members—to a deeply personal conversation between Almeida and his boyfriend's father. This sharp contrast between national conflicts and personal relationships illustrates Karunatilaka's ethical awareness. The shift emphasizes how the moral choices of his characters are shaped by their specific cultural and historical contexts. In doing so, the novel reveals that ethical decisions are not merely individual psychological struggles but are deeply intertwined with social circumstances, historical events, and cultural traditions. Ethical choice, as presented in the novel, is not a matter of simplistic right or wrong but rather a complex, pluralistic process. Almeida must balance personal emotions, social responsibilities, and cultural identities when making decisions. This complexity enriches the expression of ethical consciousness in the novel, showing that moral decisions require navigating the intersections of personal and collective responsibility, thereby illustrating the nuanced nature of ethics in times of conflict.

Besides, the critique of social structure and power dynamics reveals how cultural background shapes individual moral consciousness. This perspective allows readers to better understand the motivations behind ethical choices and encourages deeper reflection on broader social issues.

Conclusion

The revision and development of Shehan Karunatilaka's three manuscripts illustrate a dynamic process of transforming brain text into written text, reflecting his deliberate choices of creative materials, underlying motivations, and evolving psychological perspectives. By examining these iterations, readers gain insight into the fractured and war-torn landscape of Sri Lankan society, experiencing a narrative that blends real historical events with fictionalized reflections. Standing among prominent South Asian English-language writers such as Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie, Karunatilaka is equally committed to exploring the universal suffering woven into human existence. Yet, he uniquely allows the dead—"witnesses" from the Sri Lankan Civil War—to voice their own experiences, thereby exposing the complexities and hidden truths behind Sri Lanka's ethnic conflicts. This choice not only recalls the historical trauma of ethnic tensions but also peels away illusions and false narratives to reveal deeper truths beneath. Analyzing Karunatilaka's portrayal of the Sri Lankan Civil War through the lens of ethical literary criticism thus illuminates the far-reaching impacts of war, encouraging reflections on human nature, social order, and the resilience of national identity.

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