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THE SEVEN MOONS OF MAALI ALMEIDA: FROM ELIZABETHAN DESPAIR TO ECOCRITICAL HOPE

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Abstract: Sri Lankan literature in English occupies an important place in postcolonial literature but can also position itself in the arc of ecocriticism. The aim of this paper is to explore Shehan Karunatilaka's 2022 Booker Prize winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by tracing a transition from despair to hope. Thematising the civil war in Sri Lanka, the novel depicts the Afterlife from the perspective of a recently dead photographer called Maali, who tries to solve the mystery of his death and retrieve some of his photographs. In the plot, despair and hope are of paramount importance and take on interesting traits. While the portrayal of despair strongly resembles its Elizabethan conception and can pave the way for intertextual interactions with Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, hope takes on ecocritical traits through a positive form of fragmentation, which bridges human/nonhuman boundaries, and a decolonial reading of the Sri Lankan landscape. By analysing specific excerpts from the novel, this paper will underline the ecocritical themes in the novel and highlight compelling connections with Spenser's text. Thus, Sri Lankan ecocritical literature will be explored and interesting aspects of Karunatilaka's novel, such as the transition from despair to hope, will be brought to the foreground.

Keywords: Shehan Karunatilaka; *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*; despair; hope; intertextuality; ecocriticism.

1. Introduction

Following the publication of *Chinaman*, in 2011, the critic Perera expressed the hope that the Galle-born Shehan Karunatilaka would prove to be more than a "one-novel-wonder" but rather keep applying his talent to the furthering of Sri Lankan writing in English (2011: 744). Years later, in 2022, the Booker Prize winning novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* shows that Perera's hope was well-founded and that the author is contributing considerably to the canon of Sri Lankan anglophone literature, treading a path already outlined by writers such as Romesh Gunesekera and Michael Ondaatje. The continuity between Karunatilaka's novels is not merely a matter of literary hopes, but curiously takes on the traits of a dialogue. While *Chinaman* opens with a question – "Begin with a question. An obvious one. […] Why have I not heard of this so-called Pradeep Mathew?" (Karunatilaka 2012: 3) – the first words of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* offer an answer: "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" (Karunatilaka 2023: 1).

In the novel, Karunatilaka conjures up a vivid image of the afterlife, in which the main character, a photographer called Maali, wakes up after his death at the hands of an unknown murderer. Given seven "moons" – seven nights – to pass into the "Light", Maali opts to use this time to retrieve some of his hidden photographs which captured proof of unsuspected political collusions and scandals. Set in 1989, the novel gorily portrays, through Maali's eyes, the harrowing violence rampaging Sri Lanka, but Karunatilaka uses mordant satire to reckon with it, since he himself stated that laughter is Sri Lankans' coping mechanism (2022).

In *Writing Sri Lanka*, Minoli Salgado justly highlights the particular position of Sri Lankan anglophone literature in the arc of postcolonial studies, by underscoring that, unlike most postcolonial countries, Sri Lankan national consciousness mainly developed after Independence (2012: 9). The same reflections ought to be made with respect to the positioning of Sri Lankan literature in other contemporary, blossoming fields of study, such as ecocriticism. Already in 1994, Gunesekera's *Reef* brought attention to the precarious situation of coral reefs and the multi-layered, clashing parallels that can be drawn between the constructive behaviour of coral reefs and destructive human attitudes: "Coral grows about as fast as your fingernails, but how fast is it disappearing?" (Gunesekera 2014: 47-48). While Teresa Shewry explored the connection between oceanic literature from the Pacific, endurance and hope in her book *Hope at Sea* (2015: 29), one wonders whether ecocriticism can be entwined with practices of hope in other countries and situations as well, such as Sri Lanka, which, in my opinion, is accomplished by *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*.

Attempting to extend research on anglophone Sri Lankan literature and analysing it in terms of ecocriticism, this paper has a twofold aim. Firstly, it will present the Elizabethan conception of despair which, in the novel, is transported to and re-contextualised in Sri Lanka with interesting colonial implications and a striking, possibly intertextual resemblance to the portrayal of Despaire in the first book of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Since this seems to me a text-driven

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intertextual reference – indicating, in Mason's terminology, a reference addressing corresponding intertextual references within the Base text (2019: 42) – a comparative analysis will substantiate my claims. Then, it will outline a transition from despair to hope in Karunatilaka's novel, and the ecocritical traits taken on by the concept of hope toward the end of the story will be analysed with respect to a positive fragmentation of identity and a decolonial reading of the Sri Lankan landscape.

2. Colonialism and Elizabethan Despair in 20th-Century Sri Lanka

In his novel, Karunatilaka manages to weave together not only intratextuality, but also intertextuality. As for intratextuality, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* surprisingly features some characters who already appeared in *Chinaman*, such as the Englishman Jonny Gilhooley and the mysterious I.E. Kugarajah, who works at the behest of LTTE (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a Tamil separatist organisation based in northeastern Sri Lanka) and the Indian secret service. Intertextuality can be perceived in an equally direct way, if one is familiar with the canon of Sri Lankan literature in English focusing on the civil war. As a matter of fact, Maali bitterly states that "They say the truth will set you free, though in Sri Lanka the truth can land you in a cage" (Karunatilaka 2023: 325), thus forcefully echoing and opposing Anil's belief in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* that "The truth shall set you free" (Ondaatje 2011: 98). Concilio too compared *Anil's Ghost* and *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, by stating that while the former offered glimmers of paradise, the latter rather forces readers to uncompromisingly look at hell (2023: 18). Therefore, the theme of truth enables a dialogue between the two novels.

Nonetheless, the feeling of despair – prompted in many characters by the utter atrocity of military destruction and heartless, indiscriminate, constant killings – resonates with intertextual references which are incredibly reminiscent of a text which may seem rather unconnected to Sri Lanka or contemporary times: Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Indeed, while *Anil's Ghost* was employed by Scott (2019) as a fitting literary example to discuss the feeling of fear in postcolonial literature, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is eloquent in articulating the feeling of despair. In the Elizabethan conception, the character of Despaire, faced by Redcrosse Knight and allegorically representing the namesake feeling in the first book of Spenser's text, was "the darkest and most terrifying enemy of the soul" (Beecher 1987: 105). The dangerousness of despair is explained by Curran:

> perceiving oneself as invariably hapless and hopeless amounted to an insidious species of pride, wherein one stubbornly held, to the exclusion of any other possibility, the enormity of one's own sin to be greater than God's power. Despair deserved condemnation as a rejection of an attitude one was *bound* to, the assumption of God's mercy as a consequent of his infinity. (2020: 178, italics in the original)

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Exactly as happens in Karunatilaka's novel, despair endangered both the secular and the spiritual life (Beecher 1987: 103). The impact of despair on the world of the living is evidenced by numerous examples in the novel; it is despair at her child's death and the shelling of her village that drives a distraught woman to wordlessly plead with Maali for his cyanide pills. In turn, understanding of the pitch-dark despair in the depths of the woman's eyes is what leads Maali to relent and give her the poison, which proves to be a more preferable solution than living in the middle of the civil war. Precisely dovetailing with its Elizabethan conception, despair threatens not only the living, but also their souls. Despair at untimely death paves the way for wrath and frustration, a path undertaken by enraged and vengeful souls like Sena, who agrees to become a servant to the powerful demon Mahakali and rejects the Light and any possibility of solace in the afterlife.

It is in the convergence of Despaire from *The Faerie Queene* and the Sri Lankan Mahakali that the intertextual references ring at their loudest. Let us first consider the depiction of Despaire in Spenser's text, who convinces people of the enormity of their sins and the impossibility of forgiveness, thereby leading them to suicide:

> That darksome cave they enter, where they find
> That cursed man, low fitting on the ground,
> Mulling full sadly in his sullein mind;
> His griesly lockes long growen and unbound,
> Disordered hong about his shoulders round,
> And hid his face; through which his hollow eyne
> Lookt deadly dull, and stared as astound;
> His raw-bone cheekes, through penurie and pine,
> Were shronke into his iawes, as he did never dine.
> (Spenser 2018: 114)

At first, the Mahakali too takes on the guise of a man, a priest whose formless shape brings to mind Milton's representation of Death as a figure "that shape had none / Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb" in *Paradise Lost* (Milton 2003: book II, 41). As a matter of fact, the priest is described as "large and shapeless and you see no eyes, not even red ones" (Karunatilaka 2023: 272). Its shadow is perched on the roof of a building where people are tortured and it constantly feeds on their despair with satisfaction, much as Despaire is surrounded by corpses of suicides. Yet, not merely her appearance, but also the Mahakali's line of reasoning in her dialogue with Maali compounds the similarities between Spenser's text and Karunatilaka's: "God is incompetent. He is willing to prevent evil. He is able to prevent it. But he's just badly organised" (*ibid.*: 276). While Despaire claims it is impossible for God to forgive Redcrosse's excessive burden of sins, the Mahakali maintains God's inability to intervene in and put an end to the rampant civil war because of his alleged disorganisation. Although they present differences, both arguments are meant to incite despair and, interestingly, focus on an ostensible divine incapacity to intervene and provide help.

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Admittedly thriving in despair, which she calls "energy", the Mahakali's words have a noxious, numbing effect on Maali's feelings:

> You feel a coldness that curdles the blood and scrambles the cells. It is something that has scared you forever that you've never been able to name. […] And, suddenly, the cold transforms into something familiar. Not something, perhaps more of an absence of thing, an emptiness that stretches to the horizon, a void that has known you forever. (*Ibid.*: 273-274)

This is despair at its strongest and soon Maali pins a name to this chilling but luring feeling: "Despair always begins as a snack that you nibble on when bored and then becomes a meal that you have thrice a day" (*ibid.*: 274). Prospering in such numbness and progressively strengthened by Maali's emotional emptiness, the shape of the priest undergoes a transformation and eventually reveals itself to be the Mahakali precisely at the peak of Maali's despair: "The Priest has grown muscular and crawls towards you as she speaks. Her voice doubles, trebles, and then multiplies" (*ibid.*: 275).

In this contemporary re-contextualisation of Spenser's Despaire, Karunatilaka takes things one step further and broaches the topic of colonialism, which, in England, took big steps in the 17th century with the East India Company landing in Madras, today called Chennai. In the words of the novelist Abraham Verghese, there "the British got their first toehold in India in the form of a tiny trading post" (2023: 120). Abruptly evoking the long string of colonisers who conquered Sri Lanka and ravaged it of its goods through the centuries, the Despaire-Mahakali can be said to have colonial history woven into the very fibres of her being, insomuch as the souls she has swallowed scream in different languages and create a sound "like Portuguese, Dutch and Sinhalese spoken at the same time" (Karunatilaka 2023: 353). Reflected also in names and surnames, the fragmentation and linguistic patrimony of Sri Lanka is haunted by the spectre of colonialism, as happens in other former colonies in which linguistic colonial heritage has spurred reflections in writers and poets. Good examples thereof are wa Thiong'o's rejection of English in favour of Gikuyu (Bertinetti 2010: 318), Achebe's endorsement of English as the literary language of many African countries (1977: 344), and Derek Walcott's reflections on the English language: "All of these waves crepitate from the culture of Ovid, / its sibilants and consonants" (1997: 11).

Nonetheless, Karunatilaka refrains from laying the horror of the Sri Lankan civil war exclusively at colonialism's door, but employs the character of the Mahakali to articulate the terrifying suspicion that Sri Lankans too played a sizeable role in engendering the dire situation of the country, which he describes in detail. In particular, emphasis is placed on the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, whose traumatic role in Sri Lankan history is not dissimilar to that of the Partition in India (Jayasuriya 2016: 196). The moment the Mahakali voices this thought, despair becomes totalising – "You feel the cold and the empty roaring through you" (Karunatilaka 2023: 275) – and Maali is devoured by the demon. In a similar vein, after listening to Despaire's convincing words on the hopelessness of salvation, the Redcrosse Knight is filled with hopelessness: "trembling horror

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did his conscience daunt, / And hellish anguish did his soule affaile" (Spenser 2018: 118).

As Sena – a vengeful ghost – specifies, "demons or yakas, or those who command them, cannot go where they're not invited" (Karunatilaka 2023: 42). In line with this, succumbing to despair equates with inviting this feeling to reside in one's mind and actively giving it power, thus enabling the Mahakali to attack. As Beecher clarifies with respect to *The Faerie Queene*, "Despair is an odd assailant, because he has no means of his own to inflict bodily harm" (1987: 108), but relies on persuasion and suicide. Both creatures' speeches have the same result: a sudden loss of hope. In a way akin to Maali, Redcrosse is overwhelmed by despair and is on the verge of committing suicide when Una – the lady with whom he travels – stops him, thereby saving his life. In another curious parallel, it is Dr Ranee – a Helper, namely a spirit who shepherds souls to the Light – who intervenes when Maali is being swallowed by the demon. With stern words and unwavering strength, she bids the creature release the photographer's spirit, given that the demon is forbidden to lay her claws on souls whose seven moons have not elapsed yet. While in *The Faerie Queene* Despaire "*pluckt from us all hope of dew reliefe*" (Spenser 2018: 113, italics in the original), in Karunatilaka's novel the Mahakali forcefully denies any hope of altering the situation in Sri Lanka because of God's alleged disorganisation and the Lankans' responsibility. Such parallelisms highlight how despair and hopelessness seem to operate in the same way, although their contextualisation may change considerably throughout time.

3. Promising Fragmentation and Sri Lankan Landscape: Ecocritical Hopes

> "Here we all were […] paying as little attention as possible to the pair of black eternities between which our little light intervened".
> (Cole 2012: 56)

> "We are a flicker of light between two long sleeps".
> (Karunatilaka 2023: 19)

After examining the concept of despair in *The Seven Moons* and its danger for both the living and the dead, I will now explore two ecocritical ways in which hope is restored in the novel and uplifts its ending: first, a transition from negative to positive fragmentation of identity including the collapse of the human/nonhuman divide, and a decolonial representation of the Sri Lankan landscape. Understandably, in ecocriticism hope is an ambivalent concept and ecocritics are wary of overly-optimistic texts on the current environmental situation that provide readers with comfort and hope – the so-called "praise-song school" (Cohen 2004: 21). On the other hand, the ecological hopes conveyed by Karunatilaka's novel resemble Van Horn's "dark hope", a conception of hope shorn of certainty and imagining a world that "could yet be" in spite of its possibility of "no longer being" (2019: 279) – which becomes literal in the case of Maali's ghostly shape. Through the spheres of the world of the living and that

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of the dead, the novel thus creates a vision of hope which "does not re-veil the unfurling future, but rather opens space, even prompts, the dark attraction toward seeking viable futures" (*ibid.:* 279). Although Van Horn refers to alternative practices of hope in the Anthropocene, his conception of dark hope seems powerful in the war-torn context of Sri Lanka and its possible futures.

In postcolonial literature, the combination of animals and symbolism often takes on problematic connotations mostly stemming from the use of animals as passive symbols, invested with human values whose meaning can be understood within a deeply anthropic frame of reference. Added to this, animals have been used as "a basis for human social division" and in relation to marginalising discourses (Huggan and Tiffin 2015: 152). For instance, in *Amnesty*, Aravind Adiga depicts the "golden lion and […] silver unicorn" (2021: 219) gracing the Australian Court with all their lustre as exemplifying a shimmering status denied to the main character, a Sri Lankan immigrant. Moving to Zanzibar, Abdulrazak Gurnah describes the new, short-lived Zanzibari flag in his novel *Desertion* and further expresses the clashing relationship between animal symbols and flags:

> The new flag does not look that different from the old, the same Busaid banner except for a clove cluster in a green circle in the middle. It could have been worse. It could have been a parrot on a twig or a barracuda over a background of blue with black ripples to represent the waves. They seem such fragile tokens of a state. (Gurnah 2005: 246)

The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida furthers reflections on the arbitrary act of appropriating animals to stand for human values in its description of the flags of Sri Lanka – with a rampant lion – and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist group which fights for an independent Tamil state and whose flag shows a tiger between rifles. Perfectly exemplifying the arbitrary heraldic animal connections in this novel, the irony lies in the fact that there is no evidence that either creature ever lived in Sri Lanka; hence Maali's subsequent praise of the pangolin, native to the island, and its superior appropriateness to represent Sri Lankans.

In light of the untrustworthiness of animal imagery, it would be wrong to read ecocritical messages of hope embedded in the description of flags; rather, in this case the variety of the portrayed animals could also represent the ethnic fragmentation dividing the country. The conflict-imbued ethnic distinctions are shown in their mendacity and insubstantiality like animal heraldic imagery, as Maali underlines: "Despite all speeches made to the contrary, the naked bodies of Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers are indistinguishable. We all look the same when held to the flame" (Karunatilaka 2023: 335).

Surprisingly, though, towards the end of the novel the sense of fragmentation acquires more positive traits in an ecocritical light, thus conveying hope. Once dead, Maali pleasantly recognises the people whom his soul had inhabited in previous lives, their somatic features always changing but for the ears, whose shape is the same throughout the various cycles of rebirth. At the moment of Maali's death, the fragmentation of his self appears almost an act of liberation and emancipation from the negativity of ethnic fragmentation endured so far in the world of the living: "You felt your self split into the you and the I, and then into

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the many yous and the infinite Is that you have been before and will be again" (*ibid.*: 384). From a narrative point of view, the peculiar choice on the author's part to employ a second-person narrator who addresses Maali but has the traits of a homodiegetic narrator could be in line with the release of numerous "yous" who still belong to Maali's souls and the multiplicity of the self, who, after death, can seamlessly address itself through other people.

In the afterlife, the fragmentation of identity becomes positive in its multiplicity of possibilities, while the rigidity of categories such as human/nonhuman are shattered in favour of a spectrum of various shades. In particular, the transition from a negative to a positive ecocritical fragmentation rich in hope is represented by the character of a dead leopard, whose spirit comes across Maali's soul more than once in the story, but features prominently at the end. While Maali is surprised by the fact that animals too have souls, speak and can be seen roaming the afterlife, the leopard responds by recounting the story of his death and its own surprise when the conservationist who had accidentally killed him later attempted suicide: "For the first time I realised. Some humans actually have souls" (*ibid.*: 326). Nonetheless, marvelling at the human ability to create light through electricity, the leopard heartily wishes to be reborn as a human. In the end, though, the creature seems to change his mind in favour of a more fragmented multispecies identity that rejects monolithic individuality precisely like Maali's plethora of souls at the moment of his death. Most importantly, this multispecies identity is absolutely on equal footing with the human one:

> If you can't bring me back as a human, bring me back as a leopard with the smarts of a queen bee, the soul of a blue whale and the opposable thumbs of a savage monkey, cos opposable thumbs are essential when screwing bulbs. (*Ibid.*: 404)

Promising fragmentation also affects vegetal beings, as evidenced by the changing mara tree, used by spirits to follow winds and be able to locate people who are pronouncing their names. Its colours start to multiply in front of Maali's eyes: "Every time you look around, the tree has changed texture. The bark is a different shade of coffee, the leaves are flecked with gold, the foliage veers between rainforest and moss. It could be the light, your imagination, or neither" (*ibid.*: 47). By the time Maali hears his name, the tree has become an assemblage of brushstrokes, "an impressionist painting of greens and golds" (*ibid.*: 48), redolent of Dylan Thomas's "green and golden" young self in "Fernhill" (2016: 177).

Aside from the leopard's words and the fragmentation of the human/nonhuman distinction, ecocritical hopes are powerfully conveyed by the representation of the Sri Lankan landscape, torn between stunningly lush nature and ferocious ethnic conflicts. This dichotomy is hinted at by the photographs and paintings decorating the walls of CNTR, an association for which Maali did assignments:

> The photographs are mostly from 1983 and taken without preparation or expertise or a decent lens. There is violence in them all. The paintings are expressionist landscapes of paddy fields and village huts, procured from street markets for the price of a fancy dinner. (Karunatilaka 2023: 79)

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Strengthening this dual representation of the country, Maali, when alive, once invited his lover to come with him to Jaffna, where he was on assignment. Thus, "You will see this country faces bigger issues than the loss of habitat of the native pangolin" (*ibid.*: 136). In this dual depiction of the country, it is particularly interesting that Maali's war photos are juxtaposed to expressionist landscape paintings, which creates a dichotomous opposition, which, in turn, however, becomes fragmented and hybridised by the end of the novel, as I will show.

Historically, the idealising and objectifying trope of paradise has often been applied to Sri Lanka by colonisers who praised the beauty of the place and were content with a superficial view of a land full of economic resources rather than reaching a deeper understanding of the country and its colonised people. Conversely, other times the paradise motif was related to the waning European empire and voiced anti-colonialism (Deckard 2014: 150). By way of example, let us consider the following excerpt from Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*, in which a white judge is about to administer justice among local Sri Lankans:

> [he] looked out through the great open doors opposite to him, down upon the blue waters of the bay, the red roofs of the houses, and then the interminable jungle, the grey jungle stretching out to the horizon and the faint line of the hills. And throughout the case this vast view, framed like a picture in the heavy wooden doorway, was continually before the eyes of the accused. (Woolf 2015: 189)

One of those Englishmen whose works set in the formerly named Ceylon form "an integral part of the Sri Lankan literary tradition" (Goonetilleke 1996: 242), Woolf had spent years in the Ceylon Civil Service and wrote out of his own experience. Nonetheless, the overemployed paradise motif entailed many drawbacks in terms of the perception of the country and its representation. Oftentimes Sri Lankans were not merely associated with the paradisical landscape, but they were even reduced to it: "The picturesque […] enabled writers to convert centuries of Lankan civilisation into mere landscape, a static image of attractive ruins" (Deckard 2014: 140).

Karunatilaka offers his own satirical interpretation of colonisers' idyllic fantasies in the form of three dead European tourists – a German, a Frenchman, and an Englishman – who have perished in Sri Lanka because of a bomb. Notwithstanding the evident seriousness of the Sri Lankan crisis and their own demise at its hands, the tourists keep blindly waxing lyrical on the island and refuse to abandon it, so as to be able to still enjoy their holiday there by roaming through the dreams of the living. The German tourist remarks "This island ist wunderbar […]. Such good value. So much to see!" and then takes exception to Maali's war photographs "You have lovely country. Why you photographing this shit?" (Karunatilaka 2023: 328), thus glossing over a part of Sri Lanka that is as real as its beautiful panorama, whose "value" is, however, understood by the tourist in rather extractivist terms. After all, as they admit, people's dreams of places outshine the actual places. Further strengthening colonial echoes, the tourists' nationalities are reminiscent of three particularly powerful colonial empires and, were it not for the yellow shirt worn by the German woman, the

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primary colours of their shirts – blue for the Frenchman and red for the Englishman – would perfectly fit with the colours adopted to mark colonial possessions in maps such as those depicted by Conrad: "a vast amount of red […] a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange" (2007: 11).

Interestingly, though, it is precisely with images of the Sri Lankan landscape that the novel reaches its conclusion. Rather than the expressionist paintings which stand in opposition to the crude war photographs at the CNTR office, this time there is a convergence, and the landscape images take the form of photographs. Taken by Maali, they are the only photographs left in his unauthorised exhibition organised by his living friends after his photos have been retrieved. While the war photos and those of political scandals are removed, the photographs of the landscape remain:

> They show sunsets and sunrises, hills of tea and crystal beaches, pangolins and peacocks, elephants with their young, and a beautiful boy and a wonderful girl running through strawberry fields. […] This island is a beautiful place, despite being filled with fools and savages. And if these photos of yours are the only ones that outlive you, maybe that's an ace you can keep. (Karunatilaka 2023: 401)

That the serene views of landscape are the ending note of the novel does not endorse a "single story" (Adichie 2009) view of Sri Lanka as a cliché-riddled paradise, but rather weakens stereotypical representations of the country. As a matter of fact, Maali is entitled to show the positive side of his country and can rightly depict its beautiful traits because he is neither a coloniser nor a tourist. Most crucially, he can celebrate the beauty of his country because he has seen the best and the worst of it, thereby praising it without falling prey to easy sentimentality. The portrayal of Sri Lanka through his landscape photographs is as true as that offered by his excruciating war photos. Maali's photographs eventually bring hope, without forgiving the evils of the world, but preventing them from becoming totalising.

4. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to trace a transition from Elizabethan despair to ecocritical hope in *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, which seems particularly interesting in view of the gap of time separating the Elizabethan conception of despair, perfectly evidenced by Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* in the 16th century, and ecocriticism, whose development as a discipline dates to the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (Iovino 2020: 15). While there seem to be noticeable similarities between Despaire and the Mahakali, and Redcrosse's and Maali's feelings, as well as the spiritual and profane tentacles of despair, the hopes expressed towards the end of the novel are ecocritical in their trespass of human/nonhuman distinctions and the reading of landscape from a decolonial perspective, which undercuts colonial stereotypes.

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Located in the canon of Sri Lankan literature in English on the civil war, *The Seven Moons* opens itself to decolonial practices and, towards its end, pays an important homage to ecological themes, which could set the stage for an ecocritical canon of Sri Lankan literature, whose seeds could be found already in the eco-consciousness in Anglo-Ceylonese writings in the 20th century (Deckard 2014: 150). Siewers discussed the green worlds in early Medieval English literature and highlighted that they act like "sources of imaginative hope in our struggles with massive global environmental challenge today" (2014: 42). Establishing a dialogue with a Renaissance English classic and ecocriticism on the relationship between hope and hopelessness, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* offers a compelling, contemporary example of that "imaginative hope".

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