

International Women's Day: Revenge and more violence are not the answer

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We live in a world where empathy is getting a bad name. The titles of two recent books is a case in point: [Toxic Empathy: How Progressives Exploit Christian Compassion](#) and [The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits](#). Another example is the upcoming [Suicidal Empathy: Dying to be Kind](#). The authors of these types of books believe empathy is the problem. It's a problem when you start caring about others who don't serve your own interests.

This line of argument is in stark contrast to [Martha Nussbaum](#) and others' point of view that literature, films, art and poetry allow the reader to unlock other worlds, and the worlds of others, through virtual encounters with fascinating, but also extremely complex characters and contexts.

One such book that gripped me last year and influenced my thinking about my current research project, is the 2022 Booker Prize winner, [The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida](#). It deals with reading and writing violent texts in a violent world.

This book introduces Maali, the protagonist, who is a photographer dedicated to capturing the violence between different factions in Sri Lanka. Through his photographic documentation, Maali seeks to raise awareness of the injustice and encourage people to do something about it.

What sets the book apart is that we meet Maali just after his own violent death. We follow him on his journey through the underworld – or the In-Between – during which he has seven months to make sense of what has happened to him and around him.

During these wanderings, Maali meets various characters, most of whom were also victims of violence. His conversations and encounters not only help him to better understand the situation in his own country but also offer us the opportunity to reflect on communities where violence, especially against women, is rampant. And on [International Women's Day](#) (March 8) when we reflect on the theme "Women's Rights Are Human Rights", there are two conversations with deceased victims of violence that illustrate the specific impact of such violence on women.

One of them is the Deceased Lawyer who Maali recognises as one of the victims he photographed when she was burned by a mob. She accuses him of being there and doing nothing. Maali admits he felt powerlessness at the time:

"I was in the wrong place holding a camera."

"Is that your slogan? "

Her eyes are red and brown. Her voice is black.

"I'm sorry for what happened. I wish we could've stopped it. "

"Thank you. That means less than nothing" (p 63).

And then there is Dr Raine, a character inspired by [Rajani Thiranagama](#), a University of Jaffna academic-activist who was murdered in 1989 after revealing the atrocities of killing squads – with the help of Maali’s photographs for which he complains he was not given credit!

Maali asks Dr Raine if she wishes she had written more books. “Nothing is ever enough Down There,” she replies (p 92).

In the In-Between, these characters gain a second life where they not only act as guides for Maali but also prompt readers to reflect on their reality and the consequences of violence for people across generations.

Despite both individuals losing their lives in the pursuit of justice, they react very differently to the violence in the world they come from. The Dead Lawyer is furious and refuses to cross the River of Forgetfulness or proceed into the Light, as these actions only result in amnesia (p 64). And to forget means that nothing changes and that injustice only continues to prevail (p 97).

Unlike the angry Dead Lawyer, Dr Raine encourages people to let go of revenge, warning that too many beings in the In-Between prey on people’s despair. She counters the angry ghost Sena’s justification for revenge, insisting it is justified when the system, Karma, and God have failed you: “These are words... Revenge is no justice. Revenge lessens you.” (p 97).

Stories like *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* highlight empathy as a core value for addressing injustice, especially against women, and promoting peace. With his broken camera lens, Maali exemplifies someone who is deeply affected by the violence around him and tries his best to expose the injustice through photographs. He, along with Dr Raine, believed for most of their earthly lives that if only people knew about the violence, someone somewhere would do something to stop it. However, after their deaths, both Dr Raine and Maali help their deceased compatriots to realise that revenge and further violence are not the solution.

On International Women’s Day, our thoughts are with the many women, activists, journalists, politicians, and academics who are under fire and whose lives are threatened. Empathy is not toxic. On the contrary, our individual and collective well-being depends on it.

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