



# Postmemory: Trauma Inheritance and Testimonial Objects in the Novel *Namaku Alam* by Leila S. Chudori

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**Abstract.** This research aims to analyze the inheritance of memory of the past to the generation after related to the issues described in the novel *Namaku Alam* by Leila S. Chudori. This inheritance of memory seems to show that the political event of G30S/PKI, which is the background of the story, is a traumatic event for many future individuals. Therefore, this research seeks to see the form of the trauma inheritance process and the testimonial objects that influence individual memory of the political genocide that occurred. Marianne Hirsch's postmemory theory is used as the basis to explain the process of trauma transmission and testimonial objects in the novel. Using a qualitative method, the research collects linguistic units—through repetitive reading: observe and write (noting) compatible data—and analyzes the data—identification followed by interpretation to reveal the relation between trauma discourse infiltration process within the subjects' language meaning—that has been classified on the basis of the theory used. As a historically set novel, it shows that the 1965 catastrophe passed on intergenerational trauma: from the generation that experienced it directly to the next generation. This inheritance of memory occurs familially and culturally (affilial). As mediators, testimonial objects such as photographs, houses and museums contribute to the trauma of Segara Alam's characters. The trauma inheritance through narration and access to testimonial objects constructs trauma in the form of fear, vulnerability and identity insecurity. These forms of trauma accumulate and then manifested into intrusive imagery: form of vultures in the Alam's illusion.

**Keywords:** Memory, Trauma, Testimonial Objects, Post-Generation

## 1 Introduction

One of the issues attached to the 1965 events (*peristiwa enam lima*)—also known as G30S/PKI—and its aftermath is the labeling of these historical events. The labeling that has been used by researchers to identify the event varies from the terms incident and mass killing used interchangeably by M.S. Zurbuchen [1]; mass disappearances used by John Roosa [2]; and Robert Cribb calls it mass political killing and then emphasizes it as political genocide [3]. The use of the term genocide is important in viewing the 1965 events not only as violence resulting from horizontal conflict but as a form of violence that was structurally and systematically coordinated by the state [4].

The events of 1965 as a form of political genocide/politicide [5] referred to massacres that targeted individuals and groups associated with communist political ideology. This

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G. Nur Pramudyo et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Culture and Sustainable Development (ICOCAS 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 872,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-313-9\\_16](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-313-9_16)

event—described as the "single most traumatic political event in independent Indonesia" [6]—created violence and prolonged trauma for the survivor and the generation after. Although not directly involved in the events, the generation after—or second generation in Hirsch's terms referring to those who survived the war as children and the children of survivors—shows a connectivity to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before them [7].

The individual's connection to the traumatic experiences of the generation before them is essentially the concept of postmemory—described by Marianne Hirsch with reference about relationship the children of Holocaust survivors of cultural or collective trauma have to their parents' memories [8]. This concept denotes that trauma—in terms of the subject's memory—is able to be transmitted intergenerationally. In this sense, the trauma of an earlier generation is inherited and remains in the memory of generation after through narrative or performative acts by the earlier generation.

With a story that develops from and around the 1965 events, Leila S. Chudori's *Namaku Alam* shows the phenomenon of intergenerational relational experiences. With such a political context, *Namaku Alam* tells the story of the early years and adolescent life of a boy, along with his mother and two older sisters, whose father was suspected of being a member of the PKI right after the 1965 events. Although he was not directly involved in the 1965 events, due to his condition as a young child, Segara Alam was attached to his family's experiences, which seemed to construct trauma in him.

In the absence of direct experience, Alam is strongly connected to the traumatic experiences of previous generations. This demonstrates the issue of intergenerational connection in constructing or transmitting memory. Therefore, in the events that form the social context of the novel, the main character appears to have the same strong memory of the experiences suffered by his family even though he did not directly experience the events. Thus, the memory of the previous generation can be transmitted to the generation after. In her explanation, Hirsch mentions that this process of memory transmission—in this case a trauma—can occur within a family and even from outside the family as part of the interaction of individuals who are social beings. The issue in the case of the novel *Namaku Alam* is then related to the transmission of trauma from the family to him and its process.

On the other hand, this transmission is said to require a mediator to strengthen the memory that wants to be passed on to generation after. In this case, 'testimonial objects' are seen as the mediator of trauma inheritance. This term refers to an object that is the result of witnessing a traumatic event and is able to build trauma in the individual's body with a content of sensitivity that elicits a different response for each subject: judged as a heroic site or disgrace site. Hirsch stated that testimonial objects carry

memory traces from—and enable us to consider crucial question about—the past and embody the process of (trauma) transmission [9]. Therefore, this study aims to explain the trauma inheritance process described in the novel as well as the testimonial objects that contribute to constructing the main character's trauma even though Alam did not experience the traumatic event directly.

## 2 Methods

In basic principle, literary research—as this study proceeds—is devoted to the enlightenment of criticism by detecting and identifying all the movements, impressions, elements, and facts that surround a literary text [10]. As literary research that emphasizes concept of postmemory, this study explores issues and problems related to trauma and memory that exist in the reading of literary objects. This study uses Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory as the starting point for the theoretical approach to the object of study so that this study describes the forms of phenomena related to the subject's memory: the inheritance of trauma and the creation of trauma.

Indonesia's traumatic historical context related to the events of 1965 creates the problem of trauma representation in literary works. Therefore, the research on trauma inheritance narratives in Indonesian literary works with political history backgrounds—in this case the novel *Namaku Alam*—is important. In this sense, the primary reason for further examination of *Namaku Alam* is because there are representations of traumatic phenomena and experiences that occur in the relationship between subjects.

This qualitative research starts the data collection method with repetitive reading. The next step—of collecting data—is to carefully observe and write the linguistic units contained in the material object, the novel *Namaku Alam*, in form of words to discourse according to formal object. Therefore, the data collected are empirical facts concerning—formal object—the issue of trauma transmission and mediators or testimonial objects that affect the main character. The next stage is data analysis which is carried out to find relationships between data which can be in the form of genetic, functional, causal, dispositional relationships, and so on [11]. Thus, the collected data is seen in relation to uncover the construction process of trauma inheritance through the testimonial objects found in this study. After identification process—as a part of analyzing, the collected data is interpreted retroactively with the historical context and memory infiltration signification incident that manifests through the language of the subjects. The interpretation stage of the linguistic meaning in subjects' language is the main step of the data analysis stage.

### 3 Result and Discussion

The process of trauma inheritance occurs in Alam's family from one generation to the next. In this case, the generational distinction is grouped into the previous generation—Alam's mother and his two older sisters—and Alam as the generation after. This distinction is based on the consciousness and agency of the subject in experiencing the 1965 events. Alam's trauma was formed through the process of telling narratives from the generation that directly experienced the event and the existence of testimonial objects that built Alam's perception of the 1965 events. On the one hand, the inheritance of intergenerational trauma is also constructed from the verbal and performative actions of other figures who are not Alam's nuclear family.

#### 3.1 Memory Transmission: Intergenerational Inheritance of Trauma

The novel's protagonist, Segara Alam, was born in 1965, thus he was too young to have a conscience to understand the events happening around him. However, as Alam grows into a teenager, he develops a trauma to the events that he did not experience. Although he did not experience the 1965 events, because his ability to perceive events is still unformed, Alam's trauma is in fact the result of intergenerational construction.

The trauma developed in Alam is actually the trauma that his family has related to their experiences around the events of 1965. This experience is then transmitted as a memory that forms in Alam as trauma. In other words, there is a process of inheritance of trauma within Alam's family. This inheritance, which then forms trauma in Alam, occurs through narratives and behaviors shown by other family members.

Yu Kenanga explained why every time her mother or herself passed by a street in Central Jakarta, they would immediately tremble and an almost incurable trauma would reoccur. ...

Yu Kenanga ... spent the whole night narrating a horror story that was far more brutal than any horror movie. [12]

The main transmission of memory occurs through the narrative that Alam's sister, Bunga Kenanga, tells about their experience of being held as inmates in detention house. The narrative that Kenanga transmits to Alam includes the bitter experience of her mother who appears to be a victim of sexual violence and the nightmare treatment they experienced there. They received this form of abuse because of their status as affiliated with Hananto Prawiro, Alam's father, who was suspected of being associated with the communist party. In the quotation above, the thing mentioned through Alam's voice response that what he heard from Kenanga's testimony was brutal, painful, and

catastrophic. This testimony subsequently developed a trauma in sense of fear in Alam's body.

Another narrative that Alam received was an explanation of his father's fate. Alam insistently asked for this explanation. The explanation given by his mother and two older sisters was that their father had died. However, a reluctant affirmation was made by Alam's mother by mentioning the fate of people involved in the 1965 events:

"Honestly, I don't know, son... Many ... were arrested ... Some went through the courts, many were imprisoned, disappeared without explanation. There were also those who were executed..." She stopped her sentence.  
"He (Bapak) is in the last category," Yu Kenanga said continuing Ibu's halting words [12].

The same narrative is told by Alam's older sister, Bening Bulan, by explaining the events of 1965 and the fate of her father. The narrative is told to Alam, who is still a child. The point of this narrative regarding the creation of Alam's trauma appears in the utterance, "Father was one of those who tried to evade the authorities for three years, but finally he was arrested on Jalan Sabang and executed. Dead." [12].

These narratives then become a mediator that shows the inheritance of trauma in Alam's family. In addition to the story narrative, the actions shown by Alam's family also contributed to strengthening Alam's trauma. The action in question is the unwillingness and fear of Ibu, Kenanga and Bulan to deal with state institutions, such as the police. The existence of stigma labeled by the state to PKI-affiliated families builds the vulnerability of their identity.

The issue of labeling also reinforces the construction of Alam's inherited trauma. Growing up, Alam was labeled a "country traitor" or a "cursed child" by people outside of his nuclear family, which created an ambivalence in him to hate his past or the mockers of Alam in the present. To be sure, this resentment is nothing but a response to the trauma of past events that he did not experience. As such, Alam's identity label is an affilial or cultural transmission process. This identity crisis then constructs vulnerability—related to political and cultural identities—in Alam that creates insecurity about his physical presence.

### **3.2 Testimonial Objects as Mediators of Trauma Inheritance**

In addition to the narrative storytelling between characters, several objects in the novel also constructing and clarifying Alam's trauma by perceiving these objects as eyewitnesses to the tragedies experienced by her family. Therefore, the objects referred here are not only objects as non-being things but objects that have a connection with

the 1965 tragedy and are considered to archive this history in their existence. This testimonial object can also be privately owned by the Alam family and or accessible to the public. Certainly, this object has a symbolic influence on Alam's character.

There were three testimonial objects that influenced Alam's construction of trauma: his father's photograph, detention house, and PKI Treason museum. These testimonial objects mediate trauma in their ways and impacts differently. These objects allowed Alam to fulfill his desires and wishes about his family's past. From this, Alam in fact shapes his own trauma as his desire to engage with a past beyond himself.

I always had a hard time remembering my father's face. The black-and-white photos of Bapak on the sideboard in the living room looked like a familiar stranger. Is that an impossible phrase? [12]

The photograph of Alam's father is the most private testimonial object available. It opens up a dialogue between Alam with the remembrance and familiarization of the unfamiliar. However, the inability to familiarize himself with his father's image makes this photograph appear as a barrier between Alam and the figure of his father. As an object with traces of his father's past history, the photo becomes a source that infiltrates and binds Alam's memory to a figure labeled guilty.

Then, the detention house is a place that witnesses the tragic conditions experienced by Alam's family. This house even causes fear when passed by other family members. The construction of a relationship with this object occurs through the storytelling of the house for Alam's family. As a child who was also detained, albeit too young, Alam formed a connection with other family members so that this house also symbolically emphasized his trauma.

Finally, the museum that contains the 1965 narrative tragedy—PKI Treason Museum (Museum Pengkhianatan PKI)—becomes a testimonial object that certainly has a big effect on Alam. This is because the museum is accessible to the public so there is a fear of the perceptions built by the museum's narrative. Trauma built by fear is formed because Alam is part of those considered treasonous in the museum's narrative.

Why did Mrs. Umayani take us to the PKI Treason Museum? ...

...

We step inside and suddenly I feel hundreds of vultures swarming over me. The birds that appeared in my dream, the ones perched on the wire fence, the ones that flew through the air right above the kneeling Father. I stopped walking, closed my eyes, convinced myself it was all an illusion. [12]

In the linear progression of the plot, Alam's visit to the museum becomes one of the final parts of the story. Thus, all his interactions with the events that constructed trauma in him - through inheritance - accumulated and strengthened. The subsequent trauma response takes the form of intrusive imagery: the creation of vulture images. These

intrusive images are the result of the interplay of fear, vulnerability and helplessness that manifest from Alam's attempts to access his inaccessible past and uncertain future.

## 4 Conclusion

The novel *Namaku Alam* shows a narrative of historical intergenerational connections. This connection opens a dialog between the past and the present that 1965 tragedy is not only an event but also a site that question the trauma of individuals who were not directly involved. As an event, the 1965 tragedy also manifests in archives in the form of testimonial objects. These objects are then able to build trauma for individuals who are close to the survivors. This is then depicted in the novel *Namaku Alam*. With intensively interaction against narratives and testimonial objects that construct trauma, the subject in *Namaku Alam* shows the possibility of trauma accumulation—fear, vulnerability, and helplessness—through the trauma inheritance that made the violence of past generations also embodied in the self of the subject until it manifested in the creation of intrusive images that disturbed the consciousness.

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