

# Speaking Through Silence: Trauma in Literary Work

Nungki Heriyati

*Departemen Sastra Inggris  
Universitas Komputer Indonesia  
nungki.heriyati@email.unikom.ac.id*

Riris K. Sarumpaet

*Department of Literature  
Universitas Indonesia  
Riris.kusumawati@ui.ac.id*

Christina T. Suprihatin

*Department of Literature  
Universitas Indonesia  
christina.turut@ui.ac.id*

**Abstract—** Traumatic experience is hard to express easily because it is beyond comprehension and too threatening to be accepted into consciousness. As one of the traumatic history in Indonesia, 1965 history is inaccessible and haunts Indonesian. New Order strictly controls the history by silencing the certain group that against their power. The fall of New Order regime in 1998 triggers the survivors, researchers, and sympathizers to re-examine the history, which resulted in the various reports and testimonies. Literary work is also take part in representing the historical atrocity. Literary work is regarded as a means to give testimony to those who cannot survive during the catastrophe. However, it also faces difficulty in representing the unrepresentable event. This paper analyzes how the traumatic experience depicted and problematized in Lasmi [11]. By using the concept of trauma, this paper attempts to unveil the strategy used to represent inaccessible traumatic experience. The analysis underlies two points. First, collective and personal experiences are intertwined in historical trauma. Second, silence is part of strategies as well as the resistance of the survivor to voicing their voice.

**Keywords—**Indonesia, Lasmi, Traumatic Experience and 1965.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Speaking through silence seems to contradict one another; however, in a traumatic history speaking seems to be impossible. Trauma cannot be put into words. It is beyond comprehension, has not been resolved, and it always be pushed back into the unconscious.

As one of the traumatic history, 1965 history has not been resolved clearly. The atrocity which started by the killing of six Generals and one lieutenant of the army followed by the purge of leftist member (Indonesian Communist Party and its affiliation). The wave of massacre swept throughout Indonesia. Thousands or even millions were killed and thousands of others were imprisoned and tortured. The atrocity gives the way for New Order into power. To maintain its power, the official historical narrative is made up and circulated in daily life for 32 years.

The strict control of New Order silences those who are marginalized and oppressed, while the fall of the regime opens

up the chance to speak out. There is an abundance of testimony as an attempt to reconstruct the official history. This testimony emphasizes the urgency to tell their own version of history.

The time span between the occurrence of the event and the act of testifying makes testimony considered as “belated witness” [6]. The hindsight in one way gives a question to the reliability of the memory on the distant past; in other way gives a more objective view since the witness will not be too much influenced by the emotional bias.

Testimony is also regarded as an ethical turn in redressing the injustice for those who are marginalized and oppressed. The testimony can be used to mobilize public opinion to feel empathy towards the survivor’s traumatic experience, to hinder the impunity of the perpetrator and also to prevent the same tragedy to happen. Despite the importance role of testimony, only a few survivors that have written their experience in facing the atrocity compare to thousands who were jailed and stigmatized. The number reflects the difficult in narrating the painful experience. This experience “cannot be framed by, any existing frame of reference (be it of knowledge or believe) [5].

Felman [5] argues that literary work can testify the traumatic history. Literary work can fill the gap of the unknown and undocumented history [17]. Thus, literary work is considered as testimony or testimonial narrative.

Since no one ever comprehensively sheds a clear light of the event let alone survivor reconciliation, 1965 becomes unfinished history that haunted not only its survivor but also Indonesian. Being haunted by its past, many Indonesians keep on trying to reexamine the history, but the reexamination is often accused as a way to revive communist ideology. Rossa [13] argues that the New Order regime has planted “state propaganda depicted ex-members of the Communist Party as perpetually scheming for a coup d’etat. The fear propaganda is effective in ingrain the need for stability and strong government which legitimize New Order power. Thus, although New Order is no longer in power, the fear and taboo in discussing the 1965 history still linger in the social mind.

As mentioned earlier, Literature can fill the gap that cannot be documented in history, many survivors and sympathizers

try to record their experience not in the form of the rigid historical document but through literature. "The only way one can intentionally testify to something that is not true while not bearing witness is through literature"[5]. There is no strict rule in literature in presenting the past. Literature makes the witness freer to testify their experience regarding the event. Witnesses in this sense are both firsthand and secondhand witness. Thus, it is possible for the author who is not related to the atrocity to bear witness as "an intellectual witness" [8]. The term refers to a witness who did not experience the catastrophe directly.

*Lasmi* named after the protagonist is one of literary work that raises the 1965 history. The author, Nursya Kuswantin, is what Hartman [8] called "intellectual witness." She is an anthropologist and a columnist who concern about the 1965 traumatic history. Her story elaborates on the experience of a village girl that becomes the member of Gerwani.

In representing, *Lasmi's* experience, Kuswantin chooses to mute *Lasmi's* voice since all of the perspectives is filtered through Tikno, *Lasmi's* husband. The paper argues that on one hand, silence emphasizes the difficulties of voicing the atrocity. On the other hand, it complicates the idea of personal experience and collective memory in facing the atrocity which emphasizes Felman [6] ideas that bearing witness is an act of solitude. They must bear it alone because it cannot correspond to the frame of references that is accepted socially. Thus, the representation helps to build new ways to understand the meaning of traumatic experience by an individual and its link to the accepted memory by the society.

Related to the literary representation of the 1965 event in literary work, Hoadley [10] has comprehensively analyzed some literary works published from 1980 to 1990 and related the representation in literary work to the meaning of 1965 for Indonesian by using sociological approach. Another researcher that analyzed the representation of the 1965 history in literary work is Herlambang [9] and Taum [16]. Herlambang [9] argues that New Order used literary work and film to control society and to maintain its power. On the other hand, Taum [16] analyzes the power evolution of the New Order in literary work.

The above elaboration shows that there are various researches have already been done regarding the 1965 incident. Meanwhile, the representation of the 1965 and its relation to the trauma theory have been done by Sears [15]. However, her analysis is not only about 1965, she also examines some works about the colonial era. Differ from Sears this paper aims to analyze the complex relation between personal experience of trauma entwines with the collective memory which reflected in the strategy of textualization trauma. Then, it tries to find out the textualization of trauma challenges the concept of voice in relation to bearing witness.

## II. METHODS

The method used in the research is descriptive analyses by doing a close analysis of literary work. The collected data is examined uses the concept of trauma by Felman and Laub [5,6] and Caruth [2].

Testimony and Trauma are concepts used to examine holocaust survivors; however, it expands its concept to be used in wider contexts such as domestic violence, racist, classicism, and so on. The theory in this research is used to elucidate the phenomena of trauma that become more inclusive and to challenge the application of theory to the specific situation related to the 1965 history that traumatizes.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Experiencing Pain and Bearing Witness in Solitude*

Testimony is an emergent genre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a response to the historical catastrophe that occurred in the 20th century throughout the world. The genre has flourished in the 1990s, while in Indonesia, it flourishes after 1998 along with the fall of Suharto regime. *Lasmi* [11], as one of the novels published after 1998, attempts to represent the 1965 historical atrocity.

The novel presents the main character through the lens of Tikno. On one hand, Tikno is one of the victims of the event. He faced a painful and shocking experience that he cannot comprehend. On the other hand, he also acts as a witness of *Lasmi's* traumatic experience. His role shows the painful process of witnessing while at the same time experiencing the traumatic moment himself. The role makes the theme of witnessing become the center of the story.

The usage of the stream of consciousness in delivering the story makes Tikno the sole agent that must mediate between *Lasmi* as the protagonist and the reader. Stream of consciousness refers to "textual representation of interiority or interior monolog" [1]. Stream of consciousness used in the text underlines the event that occurs in Tikno's mental image as part of a preverbal or subconsciousness situation. It signifies that Tikno's testimony only occurs in his mind. He does not testify to anyone in the text. No one ever listens to him either, even though he often sings out the rumor of *Lasmi's* death. This presentation challenges the concept of testimony that requires a listener.

The presentation of Tikno shows the loneliness of bearing witness. Tikno must bear the painful in solitude since he is the one who is responsible and stand before *Lasmi* to speak for her. Tikno cannot delegate the burden to someone else. Tikno's presentation emphasized the uniqueness of personal experience which is hard to be understood by others.

The usage of the stream of consciousness gives freedom for the text to entwine between the private and collective experiences of trauma. Tikno's interior monologue gives an insight into individual experience in facing traumatic experiences. The text describes that the political turmoil in Jakarta gives a devastating impact on Tikno's family life in the village which is far from the site of the murder. The social unrest triggered by violence supported by the state. The Army as state apparatus leads and prompts civilians to eradicate the leftist movement. The terror from a gang of civilian is experienced by Tikno's family. However, throughout the story, there is no clear depiction of the perpetrators. The text-only

highlights the incident and the victims while left out the doer unclear.

The personal traumatic experience emphasizes the feeling of seclusion, loneliness, and estrangement in bearing witness. The loneliness and estrangement suffered by Tikno are caused by the incongruity between his personal experience and socially accepted memory. He bears the witness in solitude because his experience does not resonate with the field of experience. On one hand, his experience is incomprehensible. On the other hand, he defies the collective memory of the atrocity. It has been mentioned that New Order as a regime who get into power because of the 1965 historical atrocity has propagandized Gerwani and the leftist movement as the blame that killed the high-rank army in Lubang Buaya. Thus, the image of women who are included in Gerwani is tainted as cruel and immoral.

That frame of reference is contrasted by the image of Lasmi as Gerwani member. Tikno is witnessing that Lasmi is different from the image propagandized by New Order. Although Lasmi is quite different from other girls in her age, Lasmi is depicted as beautiful, humble, and humanist women. After becoming a member of Gerwani, she does not change a bit. She is still a good wife for Tikno and a caring mother for Gong, her only son.

Although Tikno witnesses Lasmi's innocent, he cannot do anything about it to defy the negative image of her wife as Gerwani member and cannot defend her. He even cannot do anything except hiding when his wife is listed as a fugitive that must be arrested. Tikno helplessness is caused by the political and social situation after 30th September 1965. The event is too fast to understand. They as villagers do not get a lot of information about the incident. They just rely on the radio to know the situation. The sudden change in society also shocks them. They cannot imagine that Lasmi will become the target of the revenge action for the incident that occurs far away from their village.

The crisscrossing between Tikno's personal experience and the social realm disrupts his psyche. He suffers the psychological dissociation as the impact of an overwhelming experience. The impact on the psyche can occur because Tikno does not prepare in facing the incident. Caruth [2] mentioned that the traumatic experience is an event that is too soon, too frightening, and fails to register to the consciousness. Thus, Tikno's madness is an impact of his inability to grasp the incomprehensibility of his own experience. Moreover, His personal experience differs from the collective memory of society.

Furthermore, Tikno's madness and his living place are the theatrical performance of bearing witness as a lonely process, no one can share the burden and you have to endure that alone. "To bear witness is to bear solitude of responsibility and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude" [6]. Madness detaches him from the painful reality. Meanwhile, living in a place where no one pays attention to him emphasizes the loneliness of bearing witness to a painful history.

Paradoxically to the responsibility of bearing testimony in solitude, the usage of interior monologue induces the readers to take a position as a witness of Tikno's painful experience as well as a witness to the witnessing process. It is an ethical turn for literature that serves as a testimony for the atrocity of

history that has no comprehensible document and no witness. The readers play the part as a witness in the very instance of their reading process.

Throughout the story, readers bear a witness of Tikno's sadness because his loved one is treated unjustly and he can only watch without having the power to fight back. Moreover, the reader has to bear to witness Tikno's painful moment when he loses his wife and his only child because of the political and social turmoil during the catastrophe in 1965.

While witnessing Tikno, readers are also a witness to the process of witnessing. Tikno's role as narrator to Lasmi's traumatic experience makes the readers witnessing a witness. Readers attend the very process of witnessing Lasmi tragic life.

Based on the analysis above, the text shows that Tikno has a role as a witness of those who does not survive including his wife Lasmi but at the same time he is the victim of the traumatic history himself. The usage of Tikno as the main character triggers readers to resonate themselves to Tikno's perspective in experiencing the atrocity of 1965

### *Silence as Resistance*

Narrating trauma is not a simple and easy task since it is beyond the ability of language to describe it. Caruth [2] highlights the unspeakability of the trauma; thus, it needs a special way to narrate it. It mimics how trauma works.

The text uses a realist narrative that underlines the objective representation of historical fact. Literature is regarded as a mirror of the things happened in history. However, there are certain strategies that are used by the text that mimics the traumatic experience. The text uses silence as a way to show the traumatic aspect of history.

Silence in the text has a complex meaning. In one hand, silence shows the unspeakable experience that cannot be translated into words. On the other hand, it serves as resistance.

Lasmi is the protagonist and the main center of the story. However, throughout the story, her voice is rarely heard. All of the narration is dominated by the narrator which is also the character of the novel, Tikno. Almost all of Lasmi's voice is verbalized through Tikno's perspective. There are only several dialogs that show her voice.

Why farming? I was curious for her argument

Because in my opinion farmer or someone who is caring for a plant is the one that loves and appreciates life. They are people who have patience, endurance, dedication, and willing to work hard. It is like that, right? [11].

This is one of a few occasions when the reader is given a direct voice of Lasmi. In this dialog, Tikno as the narrator does not intervene Lasmi's voice. However, there are some Lasmi's dialogs intervened by Tikno's interior monologue. It seems as if the conversation is taken from Tikno's memory.

Only football that cannot be comprehended by Lasmi. She admitted that she cannot understand how to evaluate football game except from the goal. And she scorned when I and Pa Kerto and also the neighbors listen to the broadcast of the football game from Pa Kerto's radio.

"Men often claim that they are not emotional like women. However, men become more hysterical when listen to the football radio broadcast." Her smile seems full of victory.

That is it which makes me bewitched by her, by her activity, by her progressive thought, by her argumentation. For

me, her totality is her intelligence; courage to take a risk. It is the comprehension of both theory and practical domain in real-life; her ideas sometimes unanticipated [11].

The quotation above shows Lasmi dialog is dominated by Tikno's reflection and evaluation of Lasmi's character. Her dialog seems only part of Tikno's recollection when he narrates his admiration and amazement by Lasmi's unexpected viewpoint. The reader gets a lot of information about Lasmi from Tikno's reflection and evaluation.

Lasmi differs from other women that he has ever encountered. Lasmi does not wear earring in the formal villagers meeting despite the importance of earring as a symbol of women and family wealth. She thinks that wear the earring camouflages her appearance. Lasmi even uses her marriage as a way to get freedom; therefore she asks several conditions to Tikno before they get married. Her courage, her revolutionary, thought and her passion for improving the education in her village lead her to be a member of Gerwani. Throughout her involvement in the organization, Lasmi also develops her knowledge. However, it does not last long. After the incident of 30<sup>th</sup> September 1965, her life turns upside down from a respected villager into a fugitive. She has to hide to save her life and her family. Unfortunately, her only son did not survive and died.

The elaboration above shows that the presentation on Lasmi's character is filtered through Tikno's perspective. Throughout the course of the story, Tikno becomes the mediator for Lasmi included the letter that is written after she decided to surrender herself. Although the letter is Lasmi own voice, but it is read by Tikno. In other word, Tikno is the mediator for the letter to be heard.

Lasmi is silent but it is does not mean that she does not voicing herself. Fivush [7] differentiates between being silenced and being silent. In his opinion, being silenced implies not having the power to speak. It signifies that there is an external force that makes them silenced. In contrast, being silent defies the dominant narrative of voice. Silence then becomes power while voice refers to loss of the power. Silence is more powerful because what is not said reflects the hidden ideology, intention, and motivation of the speaker. Fivush explains further that in narrating something, there is a process of selecting, filtering, and evaluating which determine what is to be said and what left out unsaid. In other words, voicing something means silencing other things. Thus, Silence in Lasmi is part of narrative strategy to gain the power of resistance.

The silence body is an attempt to understand the silenced history. LaCapra [12] argues that silenced history is haunted because it produces a repetitive occurrence of a traumatic moment. In other words, even though history is silenced by the regime but the trauma will evoke repeatedly. Lasmi's muteness reinforced by her positioned as an object that being focalized and as a victim that did not survive indicates the voice that is silenced but arises in the form of Tikno's testimony. Tikno's testimony unveils Lasmi's absent voice. He acts as a mediator and a reflector to Lasmi's voice. He also the one that selects what should be voicing and not. However, his selection shows Lasmi's pitiful fate. Lasmi is a good person and always cares for others. However, in the end, because of negative stigma and false accusations, she has to be fugitive and in the end, get

killed. Thus, Lasmi is silent but her voice is heard throughout the course of the story. Through her silence, she speaks loudly to tell a story that defies the collective memory orchestrated by the New Order regime.

Lasmi's silence and Tikno's selective narration indicates the complexity of traumatic history. It reflects that not all voices can be represented because voicing some aspects might result in silencing other things. In addition, to be able to give voice they must survive first. Those who do not survive cannot tell their story except it is mediated by those who survive. However, surviving does not mean the survivor can testify easily. A traumatic experience can distort memory as reflected through Tikno's madness.

The traumatic moment can shatter a person's psyche and haunted them. Nonetheless, Tikno still has a role to testify. It makes his testimony seems unreliable. In one hand, this indicates that speaking through trauma is the most painful and difficult thing to do for the survivor. However, giving testimony is an urgent task for the sake of those who do not survive. On the other hand, the text does not impinge on truthfulness in testimony but to highlight the crisscrossing between personal and collective memory in facing the catastrophe. Despite that each individual may have a different experience in facing trauma; the feeling being different may lead to the feeling of estrangement for the survivor.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The text suggests that the attempt to narrate traumatic history is problematic since there are elusive and obliterate facts and information. In addition, there is a crisscrossing between personal and collective experience. The text presents the problematic history through the stream of consciousness and Lasmi's muteness. The usage of stream of consciousness indicates the personal experience in facing trauma entwines with the social accepted discourse that constructed by those who are in power. The difference alienates an individual with the community. As a narrator, Tikno has a role to testify for Lasmi's absent voice. Although Lasmi is silent but her voice is heard throughout the story since she has a mediator that testify for her.

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