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Children as witnesses to the May 1998 tragedy: Intergenerational memory and narrative justice in Lommie Ephing's *Namia Belum Pulang*

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ABSTRACT

The May 1998 anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia remain largely absent from official national historiography, inflicting a "double wound": survivors are harmed first by historical violence and subsequently by institutional silence. While scholarship on May 1998 trauma has expanded substantially, it remains exclusively framed within adult perspectives; to date, no study has examined how this suppressed history is transmitted to younger generations through children's literature. Through a qualitative-interpretive close reading of a single novel, Lommie Ephing's *Namia Belum Pulang* (2025), this study examines how the text constructs witnessing as a narrative strategy to pursue narrative justice: the literary construction of ethical acknowledgment for historically silenced communities through aesthetic form. Integrating Stephen Frosh's relational ethics, Perry Nodelman's double coding, and Marianne Hirsch's post memory, the analysis demonstrates that the novel stages an ethical movement from adult silence toward child acknowledgment. The child narrator's cognitive innocence enables double coding, simultaneously addressing young readers at an accessible surface level and adult readers at a deeper, historically charged level. This textual design is calibrated to position adult readers as witnesses while soliciting somatic responses that invite affiliative post memory across generational and ethnic divides. By resisting narrative resolution, the novel keeps historical wounds open, proposing a relational, communal model for collective trauma recovery that counters state-sanctioned amnesia.

I. INTRODUCTION

The May 1998 tragedy in Indonesia left deep historical wounds, particularly those stemming from systematic racial and gender-based violence against the ethnic Chinese community. Yet within official national historiography, this chapter has been systematically marginalized, censored, and collectively denied (Heryanto, 2006; Purdey, 2006). This political silence inflicts "a double wound" upon survivors, whose suffering is not only ignored by state authorities acting as bystanders but also systematically excluded from public memory. Amidst this massive historical amnesia, literary fiction emerges as a crucial agent for voicing silenced truths and establishing narrative justice.

To date, the corpus of literature on the May 1998 trauma displays a pronounced adult-centric bias. Adult fiction examines this historical trauma through the psychological repression of characters manifesting as acute neurosis, phases of madness, and suicidal desires (Ahmadi, 2021; Mayasari-Hoffert, 2026; Alifian et al., 2026). Gender-based violence studies reveal that ethnic Chinese women who survived rape underwent staged trauma phases triggering identity crises, psychological deterioration, and alienation (Burhan et al., 2023; Ismail & Vinco, 2026). Transnational exile narratives demonstrate that the impacts of the 1998 trauma extend beyond national geographical boundaries (Winarnita et al., 2018). Meanwhile, visual and cinematic representations further enrich understandings of how this collective memory operates across media (Sutandio, 2019; Dirgantoro, 2021; Mu'in, 2019; Wahyuni, 2013). Studies on adjacent Indonesian historical traumas that employ comparable literary-analytical methods, such as An's (2026) poetic analysis of the 1965–66 massacres and Andalas et al.'s (2022) study of terrorism trauma in Bali Bombing I narratives, further demonstrate the breadth of trauma-literature scholarship in the Indonesian context. Although these studies constitute a rich body of scholarship, they consistently operate within the framework of adult experience, encompassing their authors, characters, and analytical subjects alike.

Amidst this rich scholarship, a conspicuous and significant gap remains. The question of how the racial and sexual trauma of 1998 is inherited, modified, and witnessed by the younger generation through the medium of children's literature remains largely unexamined. A systematic search of indexed databases (Scopus and Web of Science) using the terms "May 1998," "children's literature," and "trauma" yielded no study addressing this intersection. The existing corpus consistently assumes that this historical trauma can only be articulated through adult perspectives, whether in adult fiction (Mayasari-Hoffert, 2026; Alifian et al., 2026; Ahmadi, 2021), gender-based violence studies (Burhan et al., 2023; Ismail & Vinco, 2026), transnational exile narratives (Winarnita et al., 2018), or visual and cinematic representations (Sutandio, 2019; Dirgantoro, 2021). In contrast, within global children's literature discourse, the transmission of genocidal trauma constitutes an established subject of study, as evidenced by post-Holocaust studies (Ulanowicz, 2013; Kidd, 2005). Indonesian children's literature, however, has remained dominated by moral didacticism insulated from vertical conflicts and

national historical trauma (Nurgiyantoro, 2005; Sarumpaet, 2010). Thus, examining the transmission of sexual and racial violence memories within a post-authoritarian Southeast Asian context through the genre of children's literature remains an urgent theoretical void to fill.

The emergence of Lommie Ephing's novel *Namia Belum Pulang* (Namia Has Not Come Home, 2025) offers a rare and notable departure within contemporary Indonesian children's literature. While post-Reformasi representations of the May 1998 tragedy have circulated almost exclusively within adult fiction and documentary media, Indonesian children's literature has traditionally remained insulated from vertical conflict, racial violence, and national political trauma, adhering predominantly to moral and didactic conventions (Nurgiyantoro, 2005; Sarumpaet, 2010). In this literary context, Ephing's work serves as a critical and revelatory case study: it directly filters the suppressed history of the 1998 riots including mob looting, fatal violence, and the mass rape of ethnic Chinese women, through the naive consciousness of a child protagonist. The rationale for examining this novel, therefore, does not hinge upon an assertion of chronological exclusivity, but rather on its distinct heuristic value as a text that explicitly stages the tension between child focalization, historical trauma, and genre-specific taboos.

This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the witnessing and memory transmission strategies in the children's novel *Namia Belum Pulang*. Shifting the analytical focus from primary adult trauma to intergenerational trauma, this study explores how the child character's cognitive gap (viewpoint of innocence) and double coding techniques function as aesthetic-ethical apparatuses.

We use the term "narrative justice" to describe the literary construction of ethical acknowledgment for communities whose suffering has been institutionally silenced. While resonating with Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice, this concept is distinct in its emphasis on aesthetic form and narrative structure rather than testimonial credibility in interpersonal encounters. It shares affinities with Phelan's (2017) rhetorical narratology and with law-and-literature scholarship on narrative justice (Nussbaum, 1995; Weisberg, 1992), which similarly argue that literary form can redress institutional failures of recognition. Where our approach differs is in its explicit focus on intergenerational memory transmission within a post-authoritarian context: rather than concerning itself with juridical or testimonial justice, it asks how a text's aesthetic architecture positions a new generation of readers as ethical witnesses to suppressed historical violence. Narrative justice, in this sense, is not a matter of legal remedy, but of constructing reading positions that refuse collective amnesia and solicit ongoing ethical commitment to the marginalized dead and living.

Two questions guide this inquiry:

(1) How does the novel construct witness positions through the interplay between traumatic silence and ethical acknowledgment?
(2) How do child focalization and double coding function as aesthetic-ethical mechanisms to transmit post memory and establish narrative justice for the May 1998 tragedy?

To systematically address these questions, this study integrates three theoretical frameworks: witnessing (Frosh), post memory (Hirsch), and double coding (Nodelman), in a unified analytical architecture. Frosh's relational ethics directly addresses the first question by mapping the ethical positions of characters (victim, bystander, active witness) across the narrative; Hirsch's post memory addresses the second question by illuminating how the novel transmits affective shadows of trauma to a generation born after the event; and Nodelman's double coding serves as the micro-aesthetic lens through which we trace how child focalization and symbolic distance jointly facilitate the transmission of post memory while navigating genre-specific taboos.

The first theoretical pillar is Stephen Frosh's (2020) relational ethics, which defines witnessing as an active deed to be present and respond to historical wounds. This act rests upon an ethical relationship between the witness and the victim. Frosh maps a dynamic spectrum of witness positions: the primary witness (the direct victim), who is often trapped in an unspeakable trauma due to the limitations of verbal language to contain horror (Felman & Laub, 1992); the secondary witness (the indirect witness), who assumes cross-generational moral responsibility; and the bystander witness, who perpetuates a double wound through indifference and collective denial. This triadic framework provides the macro-ethical lens through which the relational positions of characters in a literary text can be mapped and through which the success of acknowledgment within the narrative can be tested.

A crucial cultural-ethical supplement to Frosh's relational framework is the Indonesian principle of *gotong royong* (communal solidarity, mutual assistance, and shared burden-bearing) identified as a cornerstone of Indonesian social philosophy (Bowen, 1986; Koentjaraningrat, 1961). Where Western trauma theory has historically emphasized individual psychological processing within clinical settings (Craps, 2015; Visser, 2011), *gotong royong* frames healing as a collective responsibility: the community bears the weight of trauma together, and the failure to do so constitutes a moral failing of the collective, not merely a clinical deficit of the individual. This framework is not an interpretive imposition but a hermeneutic resource made available by the text itself, which stages recovery through relational commitment, specifically Rano's decision to live with and become Liliana's adopted son, rather than through therapeutic intervention. Integrating *gotong royong* from the outset thus treats the novel's communal orientation as a fundamental ethical structure that reshapes how witnessing, post memory, and narrative justice operate in the Indonesian context.

The second pillar is Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of post memory, which explains how the generation after trauma inherits not direct experience, but affective shadows transmitted through stories, objects, and selective silences. Hirsch distinguishes familial post memory, which circulates vertically within the victim's family, from affiliative post memory, which extends into the public sphere. This expansion resonates with Landsberg's (2004) theory of prosthetic memory, which involves grafting trauma memory through the mediation of art and fiction. Frosh extends Hirsch's idea by asserting that post memory must be creatively processed into a post memorial work: an aesthetic effort that represents an ethical movement to demand historical justice, rather than remaining a passive inheritance of trauma.

When severe historical trauma transfers into the medium of children's literature, the text must negotiate the psychological boundaries of young readers. Here, Perry Nodelman's (2008) theory of the hidden adult becomes crucial. Nodelman explains that children's literature operates through a strategy of double coding: the surface text presents a simple narrative through a child's innocent perspective, while simultaneously the shadow text conceals the complexities of trauma and historical horror, which only adult readers can fully access (Nikolajeva, 2014). This cognitive gap between the two layers tactically transfers interpretive agency to the reader, consequently transforming the witnessing process into an interactive act. Furthermore, to navigate genre-specific taboos against extreme cruelty, the text employs symbolic distance, borrowing moral schemas familiar to the child's world to shroud human brutality without violating the psychological boundaries of the genre.

In addition to these three primary frameworks, the analysis draws selectively on supplementary interpretive resources: van der Kolk's (2014) somatic-memory framework for illuminating the textual encoding of physical trauma responses, Caruth's (1996) theory of the linguistic gap in traumatic testimony, and Keen's (2007) concept of narrative empathy for understanding how fictional texts are structured to invite affective engagement from readers.

II. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative-interpretive design within a critical-hermeneutic paradigm (LaCapra, 2001; Hirsch, 2012). This framework approaches literary narrative not as a passive historical reflection, but as an active discursive arena for ethical witnessing, mediating post memory, and countering state-sanctioned amnesia. The primary corpus is Lommie Ephing's novel *Namia Belum Pulang* (2025), selected purposively for its revelatory capacity as an uncommon Indonesian children's text that directly engages the suppressed memories of the May 1998 riots. The selection was governed by three criteria: (a) the deployment of a naive child narrator to mediate historical violence; (b) the explicit thematic engagement with May 1998 racial and gender-based atrocities; and (c) publication within the generic conventions of children's literature. Secondary data comprise indexed scholarship on trauma and children's literature, official historical documentation of the May 1998 events, and foundational theoretical sources.

Data collection was conducted through a close reading technique (Brummett, 2018), focusing on load-bearing textual features such as naive diction, faunal metaphors, conversational ellipses, and somatic language. Textual segments were systematically extracted using three explicit sampling criteria: (a) scenes depicting the child protagonist's direct sensory confrontation with mob violence, looting, or arson; (b) narrative interactions with adult figures (specifically Tante Liliana) signaling traumatic silence, defensive hysteria, or ethical acknowledgment; and (c) passages exhibiting a marked tension between the surface text and the shadow text. Applying these criteria yielded 25 coded textual segments drawn from 22 unique passages across the novel, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of extracted textual segments and analytical categories

Analytical Category	No. of Segments	Example Types / Textual Indicators
Witnessing positions (Frosh)	12	Dialogue of ethical acknowledgment, defensive hysteria, somatic and gestural silence, protective dialogue, and relational commitment
Double coding mechanisms (Nodelman)	8	Defamiliarized sensory diction, literal death perceptions, animal/faunal metaphors, and double-coded representations of sexual violence
Post memory transmission (Hirsch)	5	Visual contrasts with rhetorical pauses, auditory/somatic onomatopoeia, critique of societal amnesia, and affiliative communal solidarity
Total	25	(22 unique textual passages across the novel)

Data analysis proceeded through three recursive stages. First, extracted segments were categorized under the operationalized frameworks of witnessing positions (Frosh, 2020), double coding (Nodelman, 2008), and post memory (Hirsch, 2012), supplemented by secondary interpretive resources addressing somatic memory (van der Kolk, 2014), linguistic latency (Caruth, 1996), and narrative empathy (Keen, 2007). Second, close reading examined how child focalization and symbolic distance activate cross-generational witnessing across the gap between the surface text and shadow text. Third, findings were synthesized to evaluate how the narrative establishes narrative justice and expands witnessing to the reading public. To guard against theoretical circularity, textual segments that resisted neat classification or exhibited genre ambivalence were systematically documented and analyzed. Interpretive validity was maintained through argumentative coherence, consistent conceptual operationalization, and rigorous alignment between analytical inferences and primary textual citations.

Linguistic and ethical rigor was safeguarded through explicit verification protocols. Because interpretive claims hinge upon Indonesian micro-stylistic features (such as conversational ellipses, faunal metaphors, and colloquial flatness like "*Oma nggak bangun-bangun*"), all excerpts were translated by the bilingual author team and independently verified by two co-authors in literary studies, with interpretive discrepancies resolved through consensus. Primary excerpts are cited bilingually with explanatory glosses where culturally load-bearing.

As researchers positioned outside the ethnic Chinese minority, the authors maintained a self-reflexive standpoint, triangulating textual readings against official documentation (the Joint Fact-Finding Team/TGPF report), survivor accounts, and scholarship by Chinese-Indonesian critics (Heryanto, 2006; Purdey, 2006; Sutandio, 2019) to foster cross-ethnic ethical solidarity rather than speaking over marginalized communities. Finally, research ethics and copyright compliance were strictly observed: all quotations conform to academic fair use under Article 44 of the Indonesian Copyright Law (*Undang-Undang Hak Cipta* No. 28/2014), and scenes of sexual and lethal violence were restricted to the minimum length necessary to demonstrate double coding mechanics, preventing the sensationalist aestheticization of trauma as spectacle.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Character witnessing positions: Between traumatic silence and ethical acknowledgment

This section focuses on mapping the relational-ethical positions between the main characters in *Namia Belum Pulang*, specifically the witnessing dynamics between Rano and Tante Liliana. The narrative depicts Rano as a child who chronologically witnesses the May 1998 riots. Meanwhile, Liliana is an adult Chinese-Indonesian woman who is a direct victim of shop looting, rape, and the loss of her daughter, Namia. Through the lens of Stephen Frosh's witnessing theory, the relational dynamics between these two characters expose an acute tension. This tension occurs between a direct victim-witness burdened by traumatic silence and an indirect witness seeking to enact cross-generational acknowledgment.

The initial phase of witnessing in the novel is marked by the character's psyche being haunted by shadows of the past, positioning Rano as a haunted subject. This condition manifests through Rano's somatic response when the collective memory awakens involuntarily:

> *Sesak mendadak menerkam inti dadaku. Rasanya seperti digulung pusaran tornado yang paling dahsyat. Jantungku berdebar seiring bayang-bayang peristiwa kelam di tahun 98 silam secara beringas mendominasi setiap rongga ingatanku.* (Ephing, 2025, pp. 171)
> (A sudden tightness gripped the core of my chest. It felt like being engulfed by the most powerful tornado vortex. My heart raced as shadows of the dark events of '98 violently dominated every corner of my memory.)

Physical indicators such as a sudden tightness in the chest and a racing heart indicate that the trauma memory of May 1998 is not passive historical data. Instead, it represents a powerful force from the past that violently dominates the witness's psychic space. This haunting memory expands into a form of affiliative witnessing when Rano reads the physical manifestations of trauma embedded in the body of his neighbour, Tante Liliana. Rano observes that:

> *Setiap kali melihat gurat samar di wajah perempuan usia lima puluh tahunan tersebut, terlebih ketika tanpa sengaja memergokinya sedang termenung menatap jendela… gundah di dadaku seakan bergemuruh luar biasa. (pp. 172)*
> (Every time I saw the faint lines on the face of that fifty-year-old woman, especially when I accidentally caught her staring blankly out the window… the anxiety in my chest seemed to rumble tremendously.)

This portrayal demonstrates that Rano, as a member of the subsequent generation, exhibits a strong capacity for relational empathy. He actively adopts and helps bear the victim's psychic burden through an affective reading of the body and melancholy gestures of the adult character around him.

In contrast, Tante Liliana embodies the position of a traumatized subject trapped within traumatic silence. When a stimulus or memory regarding the riots is triggered, the victim's body responds autonomously to erect an extreme defensive boundary to avoid re-traumatization. As van der Kolk (2014) posits in his influential discussion of somatic memory, past trauma is not merely recorded as a passive cognitive narrative; it frequently registers within visceral, bodily responses that trigger physical resistance or acute distress when reactivated.

While van der Kolk's somatic-memory framework has generated significant debate within clinical psychology regarding the precise neurobiological mechanisms of bodily recall (e.g., Leys, 2000; McNally, 2003), its heuristic utility for literary analysis lies not in confirming clinical etiologies, but in illuminating how texts configure somatic and visceral reactions as literary metaphors for unspeakable historical wounds. In *Namia Belum Pulang*, this self-defense mechanism manifests as physical hysteria:

> *Dalam sekejap, Tante Liliana justru histeris seraya menutup rapat-rapat kedua mata berikut masing-masing kupingnya. (Ephing, 2025, pp. 174)*
> (In an instant, Tante Liliana grew hysterical while tightly closing both eyes and covering her ears.)

Tightly closing her eyes and ears, alongside the gesture of "curling up in the corner of the room" while begging "to keep the device screen out of sight" (pp. 174), reinforces that Liliana's silence is not an ethical repudiation of historical truth. Rather, it represents an absolute psychological defense by a victim whose psyche is threatened by exposure to public information. The historical wound is further confirmed as an unspeakable trauma when Liliana discursively cuts off the conversation:

> *Sudahlah, Tante kira sudah cukup. Tante belum bisa dan belum siap mendengar situasi politik yang tengah melanda tanah air. Tante jadi gampang sedih dan menangis karena teringat … (pp. 177)*
> (Enough, I think that is enough. I am not yet able and ready to hear about the political situation engulfing the homeland. I easily become sad and weep because I remember…)

The use of the ellipsis at the end of the sentence serves as the most authentic textual marker of the limits of verbal language. There is an extraordinary horror experienced by the victim, involving both rape and the loss of her daughter (Namia), that exceeds the capacity of adult language to represent.

Faced with the victim's silence and hysteria, Rano consciously refuses to remain a bystander and chooses to assume the position of an active witness through an act of acknowledgment. Rano's moral response is demonstrated through a respectful physical approach and vocal tone:

> *Aku menarik napas dalam-dalam dan duduk bersimpuh di sebelah tante Liliana seraya mengucap maaf berulang-ulang. (pp. 175)*
> (I took a deep breath and knelt beside Tante Liliana while repeatedly apologizing.)

The act of kneeling and whispering, "Aku sungguh-sungguh minta maaf tante" [I am truly sorry, Tante] (pp. 175) represents a concrete manifestation of sincere ethical recognition. This gesture validates the victim's suffering without seizing her narrative. Rano respects the depth of Liliana's grief without forcing her to speak. His ethical maturity as an active witness is also apparent in his respect for the victim's emotional distance:

> *Setelahnya, aku hanya bisa membeku ketika mendapati pintu toilet di hadapanku menutup perlahan, lalu terdengar isak samar dari balik pintu. (pp.175)*
> (Afterward, I could only freeze as I found the toilet door in front of me closing slowly, and then a faint sobbing was heard from behind the door.)

Freezing and listening to the faint sobbing behind the closed toilet door demonstrates that active witnessing does not always manifest as interrogative coercion. It also thrives in the willingness to be present, accompanying and recognizing the victim's personal mourning in silence. This cross-generational relational tension reaches its climax when Tante Liliana attempts to release Rano from the burden of historical guilt, saying:

> *Nggak perlu merasa bersalah, No. Tante tahu saat itu kamu bahkan masih terlalu kecil untuk paham situasi dan kondisi yang terjadi di tanah air… Kamu masih terlalu kecil untuk melawan. (pp. 177)*
> (There is no need to feel guilty, No. I know back then you were even too small to understand the situation and conditions happening in the country… You were still too small to fight back.)

This dialogue demonstrates a protective mechanism by the direct victim, ensuring that communal guilt is not destructively inherited by the younger generation of the majority group, who historically lacked agency when the event occurred. However, for Rano, establishing narrative justice means refusing to let the victim bear this historical wound alone amidst societal collective amnesia. This ethical awareness manifests in his internal commitment:

> *Dan kata-kata yang dimaksud itu tak pelak membentuk siluet Namia dalam benakku. Intinya, aku berharap dia tak lagi berlarut-larut mengingat luka ini sendirian. (pp. 177)*
> (And those words inevitably formed Namia's silhouette in my mind. Essentially, I hope she no longer lingers, remembering this wound all alone.)

The hope that Tante Liliana will no longer "remember this wound all alone", which at the story's end is concretely realized by Rano's decision to live with and become Liliana's adopted son, is a conscious effort to mitigate the double wound. This term refers to the injury arising from post-traumatic social neglect and silencing. Through this web of moral commitment, the novel stages a shift in the witnessing position from a passive acceptance of inherited trauma (post memory) toward an active relational alliance to heal the wounds of a marginalized community.

This finding resonates with Wissman and Wiseman's (2011) empirical study on trauma narratives in educational settings, which demonstrates that the dual act of testifying (giving voice to traumatic experience through writing) and witnessing (receiving that testimony with non-judgmental presence) functions as a transformative mechanism that enhances psychological recovery and social engagement among students. While Wissman and Wiseman document this dynamic within a pedagogical context where students compose and share poems about poverty, discrimination, and racial injustice, *Namia Belum Pulang* stages the same ethical structure within the fictional text itself. Rano's act of kneeling, apologizing, and silently accompanying Liliana's grief constitutes a literary enactment of witnessing that validates the victim's suffering without usurping her narrative. The crucial distinction lies in the textual scope of this intervention: whereas Wissman and Wiseman's witnessing remains contained within the safe space of an empirical classroom community, the novel's aesthetic design invites the reading audience to adopt an analogous position of active witnessing, soliciting a shared commitment to recognizing historically marginalized trauma.

The child perspective as a witnessing strategy and double coding mechanism

This subsection shifts the analytical focus from interpersonal relational dynamics to the aesthetic instrument of children's fiction, exploring how the technical choice of child focalization operates as a unique witnessing strategy. Drawing on Perry Nodelman's (2008) thought on the narrative structure of children's literature, texts in this genre are never absolutely innocent. Instead, they always operate through what he terms the hidden adult. In the novel *Namia Belum Pulang*, the presence of this hidden adult materializes through the author's aesthetic-ideological decision to filter the historical brutality of the May 1998 tragedy through the naive perspective of child characters (Rano and Namia) who possess limited cognitive knowledge. This filtering pattern creates an aesthetic tension that prompts adult readers to actively fill the characters' comprehension gaps. Consequently, the witnessing process is structured to shift from passive reception into an interpretive engagement between the text and the reader.

This aesthetic strategy sharply contrasts with the dynamics Todorova (2017) documents in *Zlata's Diary*, where adult agents (translators, editors, and illustrators) mediate, alter, and ultimately silence a child writer's authentic trauma testimony. Todorova shows that the "hidden adult" in that war diary's publication acts as a domesticating force, shaping the child's identity to fit Western market expectations through manipulated translations, editorial additions, and captioned photographs that overwrite her voice. In *Namia Belum Pulang*, the hidden adult operates in an opposing manner: the author positions the child's limited perspective not as something to be corrected by editorial authority, but as the very vehicle through which historical brutality gains its critical power. Where Todorova's hidden adult suppresses authentic testimony for commercial ends, Ephing's text utilizes the child's cognitive innocence as an aesthetic-ethical strategy that circumvents conventional genre censorship while preserving the trauma narrative's political urgency. This contrast reveals a fundamental duality in children's literature: the hidden adult can serve either as a mechanism of epistemological violence or as a tool of ethical disclosure, depending on the ideological positioning of the text.

The first characteristic of this strategy is the use of an untainted point of view combined with an action-oriented narrative. Child characters record historical horror purely through their senses, yet they fail to apply sociological or political labels to the unfolding brutality. This phenomenon is evident when Rano observes the initial stage of arson around his residence:

> *Aku mengingat-ingat, ini bau bensin. Ya, ini memang bau bensin. Rupanya orang-orang itu sedang menyiram bensin ke seluruh sudut toko. Ya Ampun, bagaimana ini? (Ephing, 2025, pp. 162)*
> (I recall, this is the smell of gasoline. Yes, this is indeed the smell of gasoline. It turns out those people are splashing gasoline into every corner of the shop. Oh my God, what should we do?)

Through this step-by-step sensory reasoning, the child's straightforward logic exposes the threat of violence without needing to elaborate on the underlying financial crisis or anti-Chinese sentiment. The dramatic impact of this action-oriented narrative also emerges when Namia witnesses the death of Oma (Rano's grandmother) due to a rioting mob:

> *Kak Rano cepat-cepat menghampiri Oma, menyuruhnya bangun. Tapi Oma nggak bangun-bangun. Mungkin Oma benar-benar sudah mati. (pp. 163)*
> (Kak Rano quickly approached Oma, telling her to wake up. But Oma wouldn't wake up at all. Maybe Oma is truly dead.)

Literal, everyday diction like "wouldn't wake up at all" reflects how a child conceptualizes death factually and without euphemism. The child character's inability to comprehend the political motives behind the murder honestly exposes the brutality of the conflict, positioning the reader in proximate imaginative contact with the event.

The child's cognitive limitations in understanding adult social anarchy also produce sharp narrative irony through defamiliarized neutral diction. When mass looting occurs at a shopping center, Rano describes it as follows:

> *Di sekitarku, berseliweran orang-orang dewasa yang sibuk memikul televisi, mendorong kulkas serta mesin cuci... Kenapa orang-orang menjadi rakus begini? (pp. 166)*
> (Around me, adults are bustling about, busy carrying televisions on their shoulders, pushing refrigerators and washing machines... Why have people become so greedy?)

Using phrases like "busy carrying" and "pushing" for criminal acts demonstrates how the child's eye filters looting as a peculiar form of collective adult work. This narrative irony exposes the complete loss of collective guilt among the looters in front of the child's eyes. Rano's naive question regarding why adults have become "greedy" defamiliarizes the social rationalizations for the mob violence, inviting readers to transcend the surface text and recognize the collapse of the rule of law.

To navigate conventional children's literature constraints regarding depictions of extreme cruelty, the novel employs a technique of symbolic distance by borrowing a moral schema that children readily comprehend from the animal world. When Rano hears the fatal assault on an elderly Chinese woman, the horror is refracted through an allegorical simile:

> *Suara erangan nenek meminta ampun terdengar memilukan dan putus-putus, seperti suara seekor anak anjing yang dipukul menggunakan sepotong balok kayu. (pp. 159)*
> (The grandmother's groans begging for mercy sounded heartbreaking and broken, like the sound of a puppy being beaten with a piece of wooden timber.)

Children comprehend the cruelty of harming animals long before they understand the ideological complexities of racial hatred. Shifting the depiction of human suffering onto an abused puppy functions as a protective shield for young readers. Simultaneously, for adult readers, this symbolic distance amplifies the tragic weight of the storytelling: it exposes the radical dehumanization inflicted by the mob upon the ethnic minority, where human life is reduced to the status of a defenseless animal.

This rhetorical reduction of human suffering to faunal vulnerability directly resonates with Khoiriah and Haryanto's (2025) intersectional inquiry into animal ethics and systemic exploitation. Khoiriah and Haryanto illustrate how literary representations deploy the abused and commodified body of non-human animals as a conceptual lens to expose the mechanics of radical dehumanization operating within oppressive power structures. In *Namia Belum Pulang*, shifting the horrific groans of the elderly Chinese woman onto an abused puppy does not merely construct a protective shield for young readers; it mobilizes the shared vulnerability of non-human life to starkly highlight the mob's total disregard for human dignity, thereby exposing the ultimate stage of racialized dehumanization during the 1998 riots.

Moving from the faunal allegory of physical violence to gendered atrocities, this child focalization strategy reaches its most acute expression through the double coding mechanism

in the representation of the sexual violence experienced by Tante Liliana. Conventional children's literature prohibits explicit sexual descriptions, yet the narrative navigates this taboo without sensationalizing the act. It presents raw descriptions of physical actions recorded through Rano's eyes:

> *Laki-laki itu memukul belakang kepala tante Liliana berkali-kali… kemudian mencopot paksa baju, serta rok kuningnya, lalu secara bergantian mereka terengah-engah menindihnya di sudut toko, di antara tumpukan karung-karung beras. (pp. 161)*
> (That man struck the back of Tante Liliana's head repeatedly… then forcibly stripped off her shirt and her yellow skirt, and then in turns they pantingly pinned her down in the corner of the shop, among the stacks of rice sacks.)

(PS. Ethical note on textual representation: In citing this passage, we are acutely conscious of the ethical risk of re-inscribing gendered and racialized violence as spectacle. However, analyzing the precise textual mechanics of double coding requires citing this specific excerpt, because its critical function depends entirely on the dialectic between sensory description and linguistic withholding.)

Here lies Nodelman's dualistic separation between the surface text and the shadow text. On the surface layer, young readers may interpret this scene as a violent physical assault or a fight. On the shadow layer, however, the complete absence of conceptual terms such as "rape" or "gender-based violence" transfers the interpretive responsibility to the adult reader. Consistent with Caruth's (1996) insight that the traumatic core of an event often resides within its linguistic elisions, it is the reader who supplies the conceptual horror of the gang rape based on the physical indices provided by the text. This double coding strategy illustrates that naive focalization need not signify trivialization; rather, it can operate as an aesthetic-ethical tactic to encode severe historical trauma.

This aesthetic-ethical strategy of articulating gendered and racialized trauma through indirect focalization connects with Maulana, Hidayana, and Santoso's (2025) framework of écriture féminine and epistemic disobedience in contemporary Indonesian fiction. By examining how literary re-articulations of historical figures reclaim agency from androcentric and phallogocentric historiography, their work underscores that the textual representation of suppressed female and minority trauma constitutes a deliberate act of counter-discourse. In *Namia Belum Pulang*, the refusal to sanitize the historical reality of sexual violence operates similarly as an act of epistemic disobedience that destabilizes state-sanctioned historical amnesia and restores agency to the silenced victims of the May 1998 tragedy.

Crucially, this epistemic resistance and its negotiation between disclosure and concealment diverge from Priyadarshini and Sigroha's (2024) analysis of narrative strategies for representing trauma, or "the unspeakable," to young readers in fiction about Syrian and Palestinian refugees. Priyadarshini and Sigroha demonstrate that authors of young adult trauma fiction often employ narrative devices that balance the stark reality of suffering against the preservation of optimism. *Namia Belum Pulang*, however, diverges significantly from this balanced model. While the refugee fiction examined by Priyadarshini and Sigroha constructs

a "safe distance" that ultimately offers young readers a horizon of hope and resolution, Ephing's novel resists such reassuring closure. The narrative's unresolved elements, specifically Namia's permanent disappearance and Liliana's enduring psychological wound, represent a more unyielding stance. By refusing a facile cathartic resolution, the text seeks to prevent the political horror of the May 1998 tragedy from being domesticated. This divergence underscores that the extent to which children's fiction can ethically maintain narrative irresolvability is contingent upon the sociopolitical stakes and unresolved historical status of the trauma being represented.

This finding also offers a contrast to Ahmadi's (2021) observation that representations of the May 1998 trauma in Indonesian adult fiction predominantly manifest as acute individual neurosis, overt madness, and self-destruction. Whereas adult fiction frequently renders trauma through visceral interior disintegration, *Namia Belum Pulang* demonstrates that child focalization enables historical violence to be articulated with restraint, yet without blunting its critical force. This connects with Widodo and Andalas's (2024) argument regarding the necessity of literary counter-memory, while expanding that conversation by illustrating how children's literature can participate as a narrative medium in countering state-sanctioned historical amnesia.

It should be noted that the textual segments analyzed above deliberately focus on the climactic episodes of violence, in accordance with criterion (a) of the sampling framework. While these intense scenes provide the clearest demonstrations of double coding and symbolic distance, they coexist within the novel alongside quieter domestic and relational scenes. The novel's ethical architecture relies precisely on the juxtaposition between these violent ruptures and the everyday communal moments that precede and follow them.

Nevertheless, this double coding strategy carries an inherent risk of interpretive ambivalence. The covert nature of the shadow text means that child readers reading independently may engage only with the surface adventure or physical action, missing the underlying historical atrocity entirely. Consequently, the effective transmission of post memory through this novel is practically reliant upon adult-mediated or guided reading practices, ensuring that the historical and ethical weight of the victims' suffering is neither trivialized nor overlooked.

This practical dependency on guided reading finds empirical resonance in Arnold and Sableski's (2023) study on utilizing children's picture books to facilitate classroom dialogue following community-wide traumatic events. In their content analysis of books selected by 26 preservice teachers, Arnold and Sableski identified a distinct division between two narrative approaches: 54% of the selected titles (14 books) were coded as 'specific,' explicitly depicting concrete traumatic circumstances such as war, natural disasters, and displacement, whereas 46% (12 books) were coded as 'thematic,' focusing on generalized motifs of hope, kindness, and emotional resilience without naming specific catastrophes (p. 48). Crucially, their study

demonstrated that regardless of whether a text is event-specific or thematic, children's literature cannot facilitate trauma processing autonomously; rather, meaningful dialogue requires a 'strong classroom community, thoughtful and intentional book selection, and a compassionate, committed teacher' (pp. 55) who actively scaffolds the reading encounter.

In the context of *Namia Belum Pulang*, this empirical finding clarifies the critical stakes of double coding. Because the novel embeds a specific historical catastrophe (the May 1998 anti-Chinese riots and sexual violence) beneath an innocent, childlike surface narrative, unmediated child readers are structurally primed to engage only with the surface adventure or generalized emotional conflict, potentially bypassing the shadow text entirely. As Arnold and Sableski's research demonstrates, activating the full testimonial potential of such dual-coded literature requires an adult mediator, functioning not as a censoring or domesticating gatekeeper (Todorova, 2017), but as an ethical co-witness who helps young readers bridge the gap between surface narrative and suppressed historical trauma.

This structural reliance on adult mediation illuminates the double-edged nature of textual omission, a phenomenon closely aligned with Saputra et al.'s (2026) conceptualization of narrative silence. Saputra et al. demonstrate that narrative silence operates as a politics of representation that can either foster ethical reflection or inadvertently normalize systemic violence if its structural causality remains unarticulated. In the context of *Namia Belum Pulang*, the covert nature of the shadow text creates a similar representational risk; without guided adult scaffolding, the subtle historical indices embedded in the innocent surface story risk being silenced or overlooked, thereby demonstrating how narrative silence requires active ethical co-witnessing to prevent the historical trauma of May 1998 from being normalized or erased.

The novel as an expansion of the witness community: Transmitting the past and establishing narrative justice

In this final subsection of the analysis, the discussion considers the dynamic relationship between the fictional text and the reader's interpretive position. Through the lens of Stephen Frosh's relational ethics, writing and publishing a children's novel on the May 1998 tragedy represents an ethical initiative aimed at expanding the community of witnesses. By addressing a generation born long after the events, *Namia Belum Pulang* functions as a medium of post memorial work (Hirsch, 2012). It transfers the ethical burden of remembrance from the realm of personal survivor memory to the broader public consciousness. The text is structured to disrupt the reader's role as an unconcerned bystander, inviting an ethical orientation that acknowledges the victim's double wound through narrative justice.

The novel begins this process by unsettling the comforting narrative expectations conventionally associated with children's literature. Depictions of historical violence are

presented with unsettling directness, employing stark visual contrasts to evoke emotional proximity, as seen in the assault on Oma:

> *Kugigit kuat-kuat bibirku manakala kudapati darah mengalir dari kepala Nenek di lantai. Sebagian rambutnya yang kelabu, kini berubah merah oleh darah. Nenek tak lagi bergerak. Matikah? Ya Ampun, Neneeek! (Ephing, 2025, pp. 160)*
> (I bit down hard on my lip when I found blood streaming from Nenek's head onto the floor. Part of her grey hair had now turned red with blood. Nenek was no longer moving. Is she dead? Oh God, Grandmaaa!)

This jarring contrast between the grey hair of an elderly woman and the pool of red blood strips away the protective aesthetic distance typically afforded to young readers. Furthermore, the suspended rhetorical question, "Is she dead?", introduces a sudden pause into the narrative flow. This interrogative rupture does not merely reflect Rano's internal bewilderment; it directly engages the reader's imaginative processing, prompting them to confront the mortal finality of ethnic violence and positioning them as affective co-witnesses to the scene.

Beyond visual contrast, the novel utilizes somatic and auditory markers designed to bridge the temporal distance separating the 1998 riots from the contemporary reading moment. This sense of immediate presence is underscored by the unmediated distress calls of the Chinese-Indonesian child trapped within the riot zone:

> *Ibuk. Namia takut. Di sini banyak sekali asap. Uhuk! Uhuk! Namia mau pulang. Ibuk. Namia mau pulang. (pp. 169)*
> (Mother. Namia is scared. There is so much smoke here. Uhuk! Uhuk! Namia wants to go home. Mother. Namia wants to go home.)

The inclusion of bodily onomatopoeia, such as coughing (*Uhuk*! *Uhuk*!) amidst suffocating smoke, operates as an auditory and somatic textual cue that invites empathetic resonance. This raw, childlike speech bypasses adult narratorial filtering, drawing the reader imaginatively into the terrifying disorientation of the riots. Through such textual strategies, the narrative elicits what Keen (2007) conceptualizes as narrative empathy, wherein textual techniques are calibrated to invite readers into affective solidarity with the suffering of marginalized others. Consequently, the vulnerability of minority children during the May 1998 tragedy is reframed from abstract historical data into an immediate human reality.

Having challenged temporal distance through sensory focalization, the novel directly questions societal complacency by contrasting personal memory against systemic forgetting. Through the retrospective voice of the adult Rano, the narrative offers an explicit critique of public indifference:

> *Saat media and orang-orang mungkin sudah lupa dengan peristiwa itu, aku tak pernah bisa lupa, tak peduli sekeras apapun aku berusaha mengubur semua ingatanku. Termasuk wajah Namia. Semakin aku mengingat paras kanak-kanaknya yang polos, semakin pula dadaku terhimpit sesak. (pp. 171)*

> (While the media and people may have already forgotten that event, I could never forget, no matter how hard I tried to bury all my memories. Including Namia's face. The more I remembered her innocent, childlike features, the more my chest was crushed with constriction.)

This juxtaposition between Rano's inescapable personal remembrance and the general public's collective amnesia constitutes an ethical challenge. Interpreted through Frosh's framework of bystander complicity, the "people who forget" represent the comfort of collective disavowal. In presenting this contrast, the narrative invites readers to reflect upon their own position: whether to align with societal indifference or to share the ethical commitment of remembering a suppressed past.

The culmination of this expanding witness community is framed as a relational commitment to collective healing. Through the transition from familial to affiliative post memory (Hirsch, 2012), the novel extends the duty of remembrance into the public sphere, seeking communal recognition for historically denied suffering. This commitment is captured in the closing cadence of Rano's reflection:

> *Dan kata-kata yang dimaksud itu tak pelak membentuk siluet Namia di benakku. Intinya, aku berharap dia tak lagi berlarut-larut mengingat luka ini sendirian. (pp. 177)*
> (And those words inevitably formed Namia's silhouette in my mind. Essentially, I hope she no longer lingers, remembering this wound all alone.)

The aspiration that Tante Liliana, and by extension all survivors of the 1998 violence, will no longer "remember this wound all alone" functions as an explicit narrative appeal to the reader. Refusing to leave the survivor alone in her grief implies an ethical call to recognize, hold, and articulate this memory in the public domain. Within the aesthetic possibilities of children's literature, *Namia Belum Pulang* thus constructs a space of narrative justice, inviting a new generation of readers to participate in an expanded community of remembrance that resists institutional amnesia.

The relevance of this narrative strategy is further illuminated when contextualized within international conversations on children's trauma literature. As Todorova and Ahrens (2026) observe, published accounts and life-writing of war trauma involving children have historically been centered upon European and Western contexts, leaving Southeast Asian experiences, particularly the intersectional vulnerabilities of young women and ethnic minorities, significantly underrepresented in the global scholarship. *Namia Belum Pulang* contributes directly to addressing this imbalance. By articulating the trauma of anti-Chinese racial and sexual violence through children's fiction, the novel not only provides a counter-narrative to Indonesian domestic amnesia, but also offers an important case for broadening the geographical scope of children's trauma literature studies. In doing so, it supports Todorova

and Ahrens's call for amplifying marginalized voices from Southeast Asia within transnational memory studies.

Theoretically, these findings illuminate an interplay between relational ethics and the narrative aesthetics of children's fiction. The novel illustrates how the challenge of articulating unspeakable historical horror, evident in the traumatic silence of adult survivors like Tante Liliana, is aesthetically navigated through the naive focalization of a child character. Through the double coding structure theorized by Nodelman (2008), the surface text remains accessible within the narrative boundaries of children's literature, while the shadow text encodes the grim realities of mass violence and sexual assault during the May 1998 riots. This intentional interpretive gap does not diminish the work's critical force; rather, it prompts the adult reader to supply the historical context, turning the reading process into an active act of witnessing.

Within Indonesia's socio-political context, this narrative approach positions the novel as a deliberate counter-narrative. The systemic silence surrounding the 1998 violence against ethnic Chinese women has historically functioned to marginalize survivor experiences from the national narrative. In addressing this void through children's fiction, the author utilizes the genre to introduce silenced historical memory to emerging generations before their historical perspectives are solidified by sanitized official histories.

These findings provide an existence proof that children's literature possesses the aesthetic capacity to engage with severe national trauma without abandoning genre-appropriate storytelling. In doing so, the novel's communal orientation offers a meaningful point of dialogue with established trauma theory. Whereas conventional Western clinical paradigms have often focused on individual, privatized psychological processing within therapeutic settings (a focus already critically interrogated within postcolonial trauma studies, e.g., Craps, 2015; Visser, 2011), *Namia Belum Pulang* emphasizes a collective and relational model of healing. This model aligns closely with the Indonesian cultural-ethical ethos of *gotong royong*, which, as established in the theoretical framework, provides the culturally specific grammar through which the novel articulates collective healing. Recovery is thus staged not as a privatized therapeutic pursuit but as a communal obligation: a shared burden-bearing that the reader is invited to join. When applied to historical trauma, this culturally grounded ethos suggests that healing is achieved not solely through isolated clinical intervention, but through the communal willingness to stand beside the survivor, share the emotional weight of grief, and acknowledge past injustices collectively.

Finally, the novel departs from conventional children's literature expectations that prioritize tidy moral resolutions and uncompromised happy endings. The narrative's unresolved ending, marked by Namia's permanent disappearance and Liliana's enduring grief, reflects a deliberate ethical stance. By denying easy catharsis, the text preserves the unresolved status

of the May 1998 tragedy, positioning it as an ongoing ethical responsibility for the broader community rather than a closed historical chapter.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Lommie Ephing's children's novel *Namia Belum Pulang* (2025) constructs witnessing strategies and intergenerational memory transmission in representing the May 1998 tragedy. In response to Research Question 1, the analysis demonstrates that witnessing moves across a triadic relational dynamic: transitioning from the unspeakable traumatic silence of the adult survivor (Tante Liliana), through the rejection of bystander complicity, to the active, non-intrusive ethical acknowledgment enacted by the child narrator (Rano). Active witnessing is realized not by demanding verbal confession, but through sustained empathetic presence, respectful silence, and communal burden-sharing. In response to Research Question 2, the novel demonstrates that naive child focalization and animal allegories operationalize double coding to transmit post memory without violating children's literature conventions. By withholding explicit terminology for sexual violence and resisting narrative closure, the text prompts adult readers to supply historical context as active witnesses, ensuring the May 1998 riots remain an open ethical responsibility in the public sphere.

Theoretically, this study illustrates how children's literature can localize trauma theory within non-Western contexts. While postcolonial scholarship (Craps, 2015; Visser, 2011) has established robust critiques of the individualistic, clinical Western trauma model, this study demonstrates how *Namia Belum Pulang* localizes these insights within an Indonesian cultural ethos. Through the framework of gotong royong, the narrative conceptualizes trauma recovery not as a privatized therapeutic pursuit, but as a collective, relational responsibility to bear witness and support survivors.

These findings also yield vital pedagogical implications. Because double coding generates an inherent interpretive ambivalence, wherein young readers may access only the surface narrative and miss the historical trauma beneath, the novel's ethical efficacy requires mediated reading practices. Structured adult mediation in classroom and community settings, including guided discussions and reflective dialogues, is essential to help young readers navigate the shadow text responsibly without inducing secondary traumatization, offering a viable model for contemporary Indonesian civic and historical education.

The study's principal limitation lies in its text-intrinsic focus on a single novel, which illuminates narrative design but cannot measure actual reception. Future empirical research (including classroom reception studies, reader-response analyses, and cross-generational focus groups across diverse ethnic communities in Indonesia) is needed to evaluate how child and adult readers comprehend and emotionally process these double-coded trauma representations in practice.

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