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Violence and collective trauma through ‘Night’ in contemporary Acehese novels

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Abstract

The long-lasting conflict between the Indonesian administration and the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*/GAM) ended in 2004. However, while the fight ended, the residue and fragments of the conflict remained. The attempt to reconcile with violence and trauma is best captured through the works of contemporary Acehese writers. Among other works of fiction, the novel writers try to express what the conflict meant for the Acehese people. To this end, the current article is aimed at exploring Acehese representations of violence, trauma, oppression, fear, and hopelessness through the metaphorical and symbolic meaning of ‘night’ in four contemporary Acehese novels. This paper demonstrates the way the Acehese contemporary writers represent violence, trauma, oppression, fear, and hopelessness through the metaphor of ‘night’. Qualitative content analysis was used to categorize the words, phrases, or paragraphs extracted from the novels. The data were analyzed by using a post-conflict approach. The novels reveal kinds of violence, trauma, oppression, fear, and hopelessness through the imagery of ‘night’ highlighting multi-layered experiences during the conflict. The four novels have tried to bring into play the ‘unfinished business’ of post-conflict Aceh. The novels also highlight the role of contemporary Acehese novels in post-conflict societies. The disappeared left buried or unburied, the violence, the unresolved trauma, injustices, fear, and hopelessness during the conflict means that the Aceh of the past haunts and disturbs the Aceh of the present.

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1 Introduction

Acehnese literature, encompassing epic poems, folk stories, contemporary novels, and poetry, embodies the distinct cultural legacy and historical narrative of the Acehese people. This literature functions both as a source of pleasure and artistic expression, as well as a vehicle for preserving and disseminating the narratives, values, and beliefs of the Acehese people. Contemporary Acehese novels, such as *Akhirnya Senja* (Tripa, 2007), *Lampuki* (Nur, 2011), *Percikan Darah di Bunga* (Nur, 2011), and *Teuntra Atom* (Angen, 2009), showcase the catastrophic situation in Aceh and demonstrate the desire and attempt of writers to establish peace and harmony in the region. These novels unequivocally denounce violence and chaotic situations in Aceh, which only prolong the physical and psychological suffering of the people, often symbolized through the metaphor of 'night'.

The metaphor of 'night' in contemporary Acehese novels underscores the same untamed wilderness depicted in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In these novels, 'night' is employed as a conceptual metaphor representing a multitude of associative meanings such as wildness, sorrow, vengeance, and domination. Much like Conrad's work (Kimmel, 2005), the 'night' in Acehese literature encapsulates the chaos and turbulence of post-conflict Aceh, symbolizing a "loss of rational control, succumbing to passions of greed and power" (Kimmel, 2005, p. 208). The overarching metaphor of wilderness in these novels encompasses a range of associative meanings, including wildness, attraction, aggression, vengeance, domination, conquest, sorrow, patience, and nightmares.

In "The Value of Night in English Poetry of The Romantic Period" by Mahil Abd Allah (2021), the concept of 'night' is explored as a significant symbol in Romantic poetry. The study examines how poets of the Romantic period highlight the value of night and its associated images of nature. He found that night is depicted as a sign of beauty and tranquility in human life, often associated with mystery and the unknown, and as a time for reflection and connection with nature. Similarly, in the context of contemporary Acehese novels, the metaphor of 'night' is employed to underscore the untamed wilderness and the multitude of associative meanings such as wildness, sorrow, vengeance, and domination. This exploration of the 'night' serves to reflect on the past and the ongoing process of healing and rebuilding in post-conflict societies. Schlink maintains it as "the process of becoming able to both remember and forget" (2009, p. 36).

The Acehese novels primarily engage with political themes that highlight the contest of the Free Aceh Movement against Indonesia and its subsequent impact on the community's trauma. Post-conflict literature emerging in recent decades in regions such as Northern Ireland, South Africa, Latin America, and Australia also focuses on trauma as a central theme (Magennis, 2016). Local scholars, such as Harun and Suhaimi (2017), Ismiati (2013), Karnafi (2013), Kasmir (2015), Khairi et al. (2017), Khasanah (2018), Liza (2018), Marlina (2017), Rosmawati (2017), Sari (2018), Syahriandi (2014), and Wildan (2013), have extensively studied various aspects of Acehese literature but have not situated these works within the framework of post-conflict literature. While previous studies have explored various dimensions of Acehese literature, there is a noticeable gap in situating these works within the framework of "unfinished business." It enables the exploration of the potential role literature may have in the broader process of "coming to terms with the past" (Andrews & McGuire, 2016, p. 1), especially when that past is marked by civil war, ethno-religious conflict, or life under dictatorship or authoritarian rule. This study seeks to bridge this gap by using post-conflict concepts to analyze contemporary Acehese novels and their portrayal of violence, trauma, injustices, and hopelessness.

This study aims to investigate how the imagery of 'night' is associated with violence and trauma in contemporary Acehese novels and examine how Acehese writers demonstrate post-conflict society in their writings. This study introduces a novel approach by situating contemporary Acehese novels within the framework of post-conflict literature to reveal how contemporary Acehese writers



approach violent conflict and the equally important subject of peace and how literature attempts to understand the past and reimagine both the present and the future. This study also borrows the concept of Morris-Suzuki's (2013) and Kossew's (2019) "unfinished business" to analyse the novels, as the term "unfinished business" offers a significant framework for analysing the metaphor of "night" in contemporary Acehese novels.

Morris-Suzuki (2013, p. 19) defines "unfinished business" as "suppressed or discarded fragments of the past that have a tendency to return as ghosts to haunt individuals, communities, nations, and international relationships." A novel, according to her, may face the "ghosts" of violent pasts. She contends that historical injustices cannot merely be acknowledged and overlooked; rather, the processes of recollection, reconciliation, and redress must persist. Kossew (2019) expands the concept of "unfinished business" to examine how literature functions as a means for confronting and contemplating the "unfinished business" of postcolonial countries. She analyses how literary works interact with issues of historical memory, trauma, and the persistent quests for justice and reconciliation. Kossew's work underscores literature's function in sustaining discourse on unresolved concerns and in contesting prevailing narratives that aim to obscure or diminish these matters.

Morris-Suzuki (2017), in her introduction to "unfinished business," she examines the persistent and unresolved matters concerning historical memory and justice. She asserts that rectifying historical injustices is an ongoing endeavour that extends beyond formal apologies, reparations, or reconciliation commissions. Consequently, these initiatives frequently result in unsolved issues, necessitating continuous memory, reconciliation, and restitution. Morris-Suzuki exemplifies this concept through global instances like the monument in Nairobi honouring the Mau Mau rebels and the statue in Seoul symbolising the "comfort women" who endured suffering during the Japanese wartime (2017). These examples underscore the continual necessity to confront and address the past, even after the establishment of formal settlements and agreements. Kossew (2019), in her analysis "Unfinished Business: Apology Cultures in the Asia Pacific," explores how diverse cultural practices and narratives shape our understanding of historical and contemporary human relationships inside and among nation-states. Kossew's interdisciplinary methodology integrates literary studies, history, film, and cultural studies, highlighting the tangible and symbolic consequences of apology in the Asia Pacific area. Kossew (2019) further, use the term "ghost of a violent past" to explore the effects of past violence that continue to haunt contemporary societies. This idea is rooted in the notion that historical traumas, such as colonial oppression, wars, and other forms of systemic violence, leave behind a spectral presence that influences the present. Morris-Suzuki (2013, 2017) and Kossew (2019) emphasise the necessity of ongoing endeavours to rectify historical injustices and the influence of cultural narratives in moulding our comprehension of history and contemporary issues.

Within the realm of post-conflict literature in Aceh, the notion of "unfinished business" serves as a framework to examine the metaphor of 'night' as shown in modern Acehese novels. In these works, the metaphor of 'night' frequently represents the turmoil, pain, and unsolved concerns that endure in post-conflict Acehese culture to show to show "violence as the inevitable condition" (Jefferess, 2008, p. 137). Analysing 'night' using the perspective of "unfinished business" enhances our comprehension of how these novels confront the persistent challenges of justice, reconciliation, and healing in Aceh.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it provides a deeper understanding of the intricate socio-political dynamics of Aceh and the impact of historical events and political turmoil on the Acehese people. Second, it illuminates how contemporary Acehese novels employ the metaphor of 'night' to dramatize and intensify the violence and traumatic experiences of the people living in Aceh. Third, it contributes to the broader discourse on post-conflict narratives and their significance in literary studies, offering insights into how literature can serve as a vehicle for



reconciliation and the preservation of collective memory. Fourth, it enhances our understanding of Acehese literature, highlighting its role in confronting societal and political injustices and amplifying the voices of minorities and the oppressed.

2 Methods

Four novels consisting of Nur's *Lampuki* (2011) and *Percikan Darah di Bunga* (2005), Tripa's *Akhirnya Senja* (2007), and Angen's *Teuntra Atom* (2009) were selected to be the primary sources for the analysis. These novels were written and set in or are explicitly concerned about the conflict in Aceh between secessionists and the Indonesian government during the latter part of the 20th century. We mainly used content analysis as a method to reduce, narrow, and categorize the words, phrases, or paragraphs extracted from the novels drawn from Short (2017), Cengiz and Karlsson (2021) and Stroud and Higgins Joyce (2011), who, among others, have both pioneered content analysis as a method and have shown its value in analysing a variety of texts across a range of disciplines. We used NVivo software to map and find the word 'night'. We further placed the events of happenings situated or during the night under the sub-themes of violence, trauma, oppression, and hopelessness. The findings were analyzed using the post-conflict literary theory focusing on the violence and traumatic experiences and the concept of "unfinished business" proposed by Morris-Suzuki (2013, 2017) and Kossew (2019).

3 Findings

Table 1: Night as a Time of Violence

Events/Happenings at Night	
a.	Soldiers conduct violent raids at night, resulting in shootings and assaults, and accusing victims of being rebels (Nur, 2011, pp. 32–33).
b.	Armed men forcibly capture individuals at night, creating a sense of insecurity and fear (Nur, 2011, p. 101).
c.	Soldiers lurk in the darkness, ambushing and attacking unsuspecting individuals on the streets at midnight (Nur, 2011, pp. 118–119).
d.	Frequent gunfire and bomb explosions occur at night, creating a constant atmosphere of conflict and danger (Nur, 2011, pp. 317–318).
e.	Descriptions of soldiers and armed men conducting violent raids at night, resulting in abductions, killings, and assaults (Nur, 2005, pp. 15, 36, 37, 44, 115).
f.	The presence of spies and armed groups hiding in the darkness, creating an atmosphere of fear and terror (Nur, 2005, pp. 35, 91).
g.	Night is a time when violent confrontations and raids occur, often leading to disasters the following day (Nur, 2005, pp. 37, 362).
h.	Armed men forcibly enter homes at night, creating a sense of fear and unease (Tripa, 2007, p. 1).
i.	The presence of armed, uninvited guests at night, often targeting specific individuals and causing distress (Tripa, 2007, pp. 1, 11, 13).
j.	Night-time raids and confrontations lead to a pervasive sense of danger and vulnerability (Tripa, 2007, pp. 1, 3, 11).
k.	The night is depicted as a time of intense violence, with events such as the forcible eviction of immigrants, the burning of houses, and the stoning of innocent residents (Angen, 2009, p. 199).
l.	The night is associated with acts of political vengeance and cruelty, where just hearing the voice of a Transmigration Javanese can ignite violent actions (Angen, 2009, p. 200).
m.	Descriptions of violence, such as the near decapitation of a girl and the dragging of corpses, highlight the brutality that occurs under the cover of night (Angen, 2009, p. 202).



Table 2: Night as a Symbol of Trauma

Events/Happenings at Night	
a.	The emotional toll of night-time violence and the loss of loved ones during the night, leading to feelings of sadness and hopelessness (Nur, 2011, p. 64).
b.	Nightmares, disturbed sleep, and anxiety caused by the sounds of gunfire and other violent events during the night (Nur, 2011, pp. 183–184).
c.	The oppressive silence of the night, amplifying feelings of fear and restlessness (Nur, 2011, pp. 242, 433).
d.	The psychological impact of night-time violence on individuals, causing recurring trauma, nightmares, and disturbed sleep (Nur, 2005, pp. 54, 183).
e.	The oppressive silence of the night, amplifying feelings of fear and anxiety (Nur, 2005, pp. 36, 242, 266).
f.	The recurring theme of death and loss during the night, with references to the deaths of friends, neighbors, and loved ones (Nur, 2005, p. 64).
g.	The psychological impact of night-time violence, with characters [Sabalah, Fatimah, and women] experiencing anxiety, sleeplessness, and fear (Tripa, 2007, pp. 1, 3, 11).
h.	Women in the village are haunted by thoughts of who might be targeted next, leading to a constant state of fear (Tripa, 2007, p. 3).
i.	The lack of visible traces left by night-time intruders adds to the sense of mystery and unease (Tripa, 2007, p. 5).
j.	The psychological impact of night-time violence is evident, with characters [villagers] experiencing intense fear, anxiety, and helplessness (Angen, 2009, pp. 199–200).
k.	The events of the night lead to a lasting sense of trauma for the victims, who are forced to abandon their [transmigrants'] homes and possessions (Angen, 2009, p. 200).
l.	The imagery of fire and destruction at night symbolizes the irreversible damage and loss experienced by the affected communities (Angen, 2009, p. 199).
m.	Characters [villagers and Fatimah] reflect on their traumatic experiences and memories during the quiet hours of the night, allowing for introspection and emotional processing (Nur, 2011, pp. 183, 242; Tripa, 2007, p. 11).
n.	The night serves as a backdrop for characters to reflect on the traumatic events they have experienced, allowing for introspection and emotional processing (Angen, 2009, pp. 199–200).

Table 3: Night as a Time of Oppression and Fear

Events/Happenings at Night	
a.	Villagers are warned not to wander outside at night due to the presence of rebels and soldiers (Nur, 2011, pp. 270–271).
b.	The oppressive silence of the night, reflecting the fear and tension that grips the community (Nur, 2011, pp. 266, 362).
c.	Characters [villagers] express a sense of hopelessness and resignation during the night, with the darkness symbolizing the uncertainty and despair of their situation (Nur, 2011, p. 433).
d.	Villagers are warned not to wander outside at night due to the presence of rebels and soldiers (Nur, 2005, pp. 270–271).
e.	The oppressive silence of the night, reflecting the fear and tension that grips the community (Nur, 2005, pp. 242, 266).



Events/Happenings at Night	
f.	Villagers express a sense of hopelessness and resignation during the night, with the darkness symbolizing the uncertainty and despair of their situation (Nur, 2005, p. 433).
g.	The fear of uninvited guests who can come at any time, creating a sense of unpredictability and threat (Tripa, 2007, p. 11).
h.	Women hold their husbands tightly all night, not allowing them to leave the house due to fear (Tripa, 2007, p. 14).
i.	The village is gripped by fear, with people choosing to stay indoors both day and night to avoid danger (Tripa, 2007, p. 14).
j.	The night is portrayed as a time when the powerful feel emboldened to act with impunity, riding the wave of political power to commit acts of violence and oppression (Angen, 2009, p. 201).
k.	The presence of state security forces patrolling day and night adds to the atmosphere of fear and control (Angen, 2009, p. 229).
l.	The crescent moonlight during these violent events adds a chilling and oppressive quality to the night, emphasizing the fear experienced by the victims (Angen, 2009, pp. 199, 202).

Table 4: Night as a Metaphor for Hopelessness

Events/Happenings at Night	
a.	The recurring theme of death and loss during the night, with references to the deaths of friends, neighbors, and loved ones (Nur, 2011, p. 64).
b.	The sound of gunfire and bomb explosions turning into a nightly routine, creating an atmosphere of desensitization and acceptance of violence (Nur, 2011, pp. 279, 362).
c.	Villagers express a sense of hopelessness and resignation during the night, with the darkness symbolizing the uncertainty and despair of their situation (Nur, 2005, pp. 33, 183).
d.	Characters [villagers and Fatimah] express a sense of hopelessness and resignation during the night, with the darkness symbolizing the uncertainty and despair of their situation (Tripa, 2007, p. 3).
e.	The recurring theme of uninvited guests and night-time violence reinforces the sense of powerlessness and vulnerability (Tripa, 2007, pp. 1, 11, 13).
f.	The night is used as a metaphor for the hopelessness and despair felt by the victims, who are left with no choice but to flee and abandon everything they own (Angen, 2009, p. 200).
g.	The uncontrollable nature of the night reflects the chaos and powerlessness experienced by those caught in the midst of political violence (Angen, 2009, p. 202).

4 Discussion

The repeated use of night as a setting for violence in post-conflict literature aligns with Jefferess' (2008, p. 137) "violence as the inevitable condition." The inevitability of violence is underscored by the consistent portrayal of night-time raids, assaults, and confrontations (Angen, 2009; Nur, 2005, 2011; Tripa, 2007). Night becomes a symbol of the unrelenting and pervasive nature of violence in these narratives, where armed men and soldiers use the cover of darkness to carry out their brutal actions. The night amplifies the sense of danger and vulnerability experienced by the characters, emphasizing that violence is an inescapable reality in their lives.

The portrayal of night as a symbol of trauma resonates with Morris-Suzuki's idea of "unfinished business." The night-time violence leaves a lasting psychological impact on the characters, leading to recurring trauma, nightmares, and disturbed sleep (Angen, 2009; Nur, 2005, 2011; Tripa, 2007).



The oppressive silence of the night amplifies feelings of fear and anxiety, highlighting the unresolved and lingering effects of the past violence. The metaphor of night as a symbol of trauma captures the characters' ongoing struggle to cope with their traumatic experiences and the lasting scars left by the conflict. It reminds us of violence toward the Black community in American society (Wahyuni & Andriani, 2021).

The depiction of night as a time of oppression and fear aligns with Kossew's (2019) "ghosts" of violent pasts. The fear of night-time raids, uninvited guests, and the presence of armed forces patrolling the area (Angen, 2009; Nur, 2005, 2011; Tripa, 2007) evokes the haunting presence of past violence. The night-time oppression reflects the characters' sense of powerlessness and the lingering threat of violence that continues to shape their lives. The oppressive silence and the unpredictability of night-time events reinforce the characters' constant state of fear and anxiety, illustrating how the ghosts of past violence continue to haunt the present.

The recurring theme of death and loss during the night, along with the characters' feelings of hopelessness and resignation, aligns with the notion of "unfinished business" (Morris-Suzuki, 2013, 2017) and the "ghosts" of violent pasts (Kossew, 2019). The night symbolizes the uncertainty and despair of the characters' situation, reflecting their sense of powerlessness in the face of ongoing violence (Angen, 2009; Nur, 2005, 2011; Tripa, 2007). The uncontrollable nature of the night and the recurring theme of uninvited guests and night-time violence reinforce the characters' sense of vulnerability and the inescapable reality of their circumstances. Al-Chaidar et al (1999) confirms that the unrest and violence in Aceh are perceived as the outcomes of prolonged historical processes that have directly impacted the lives of the people in Aceh.

Night serves as a time for characters to reflect on their traumatic experiences and memories, allowing for introspection and emotional processing (Angen, 2009; Nur, 2011; Tripa, 2007). This aligns with Kossew's (2019) concept of the "ghosts" of violent pasts, as the characters' reflections on their trauma illustrate how the past continues to shape their present. The quiet hours of the night provide a space for characters to process their emotions and confront the unresolved aspects of their experiences, highlighting the enduring impact of past violence on their lives.

The metaphor of night in post-conflict literature, as analyzed through the lenses of Morris-Suzuki's idea of "unfinished business," and Kossew's (2019) "ghosts" of violent pasts, reveals the multifaceted role of night in representing violence, trauma, oppression, hopelessness, and reflection. Night is not merely a backdrop for these narratives but a powerful symbol that encapsulates the complex and enduring impact of conflict on individuals and communities. By examining the metaphor of night in this context, we gain a deeper understanding of the pervasive and inescapable nature of violence, the lasting scars of trauma, and the ongoing struggle to find hope and meaning in the aftermath of conflict. Violent experiences, human rights abuses, and contestation over historical events are often found in the post-conflict literature that has emerged in recent decades in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Latin America and Australia, focusing on trauma as a central theme (Magennis, 2016). Schlink maintains, when discussing post-conflict literature, that "detransformation is the process of becoming able to both remember and forget" (2009, p. 36). In post-conflict societies, literary works often participate in uncovering or reconciling with "unfinished business" or join in the contesting over how particular events ought to be remembered. These post-conflict literary works share the need to rewrite or revisit the past and echo the sense of injustice or a need to expose a past that can be read as a reanimating of the past to speak to debates about the present (Kossew, 2019).

From this sense, Acehese novels share the common losses experienced by a grieving community. The works of fiction from these regions attempt to show the merits through which the experiences are narrated. Grief and recovery are foregrounded in the fiction, signifying a novel as a way to recover what has been missing in the past (Magennis, 2016) - a core characteristic of post-conflict societies.



As Andrews and Maguire (2016, p. 3) note, post-conflict literature is concerned with “the relationship between literature and the attempt to articulate just such forms of counter-history.”

Literature has been a possible gate to be used as “a source of knowledge and an object of critical inquiry” (Andrews & McGuire, 2016, p. 4). Contemporary Acehese novels, in this sense, use these concepts and employ them as instruments to discover various works of literary production to investigate if our understanding of the aftermath of conflict is illuminated or questioned by literary texts. These contemporary Acehese writers do not intend to rewrite history but reveal a hidden history and seek to offer a new way of reading to illuminate or confirm our understanding of contemporary Aceh. In this way, these literary works can be understood to be an expression of their consciousness to show Aceh in all its complexities. This consciousness becomes a central theme that can be read as a project of “revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4). Thus, novels have become an important instrument for constructing an image of the past that is different from the fabrication of regimes.

The turn to the traumatic memory of the past and the violence in the post-conflict Aceh can be read as what Humphrey and Valverde (2016, p. 130) call “the democratisation of memory through which those silenced and excluded by violence and repression are able to participate in the production of a new collective consensual memory.” The victims’ experiences and testimonies are used to provide windows into the past about other people’s experiences, i.e. we borrow their memories. In doing so, it gives us a sense of immediacy, texture, and insight that we could never acquire through objective accounts alone (Carter & Aulette, 2009, p. 158). In the post-conflict period, the victims’ narratives have emerged as highly important as transitional justice strategies to provide public memory about past violence reframed to bring the political conflict to an end and achieve reconciliation (Humphrey & Valverde, 2016).

5 Conclusion

The emergence of contemporary Acehese literature in the post-conflict Aceh has served as a vehicle for personal expression, introspection, and advocacy for justice. The post-conflict literature of Aceh has been inspired by parallel literature and scholarship that emerged from similar post-conflict societies such as Ireland, South Africa, Latin America, and Australia. This article views contemporary Acehese fiction as a production of post-conflict society. The act of writing novels represents attempts by Acehese literary writers to revisit and contest the past by detailing and representing traumatic experiences, the abuse of human rights, and unequal power, as well as challenging the way in which historical events are memorialized. Drawing from their own experiences, observations, projects, anxieties, and fantasies, the authors have used the word ‘night’ to represent the life of the people during the conflict to the memory and as historical events and, on occasion, a broader audience, on what happened during the conflict.

It has been demonstrated how the novels revisit Aceh through the ‘night.’ These works have tried to bring into play the “unfinished business” of post-conflict Aceh. The missing, whether interred or not, the bloodshed, the lingering trauma, the persistent disparities and injustices, and the conflict’s enduring fight render the Aceh of the past a haunting presence in the Aceh of the present. The four novels have demonstrated how the metaphor of ‘night’ helps the Acehese people make sense of the past. They give voice to the dead or those without the ability to speak and seek to impart crucial lessons to their audiences about the past, present, and future of Acehese society.

Future research should explore the broader implications of night-time violence in various contexts and communities. This includes studying different regions, cultures, and conflicts to understand the universal and unique aspects of night-time violence.



Disclosure Statement

The author(s) claim there is no conflict of interest.

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