

A Deconstructive Reading of the Trauma in Martin Aleida's "*Tanpa Pelayat dan Mawar Duka*"

Lany Kristono

lany.kristono@staff.uksw.edu

English Department, Satya Wacana Christian University

Abstract

Being one of the most widely discussed turmoil, the 1965 tragedy must have left a cultural trauma to those involved, particularly the victims. As one victim of the event, Martin Aleida should know better how such a trauma represents itself. Therefore, this study would like to examine the trauma in his work "Tanpa Pelayat dan Mawar Duka" ("Without Mourners nor Roses"): who suffers from the trauma, how they respond to the trauma, and the ideology underlying the trauma from the perspective of Deconstruction. Derrida's Deconstruction has been selected as the story contains paradoxes and this study adopts Jeffrey Alexander's belief that trauma is socially constructed instead of a result of the event itself. A scrutiny of the trauma in the story confirms Alexander's notion of the trauma and the dominant ideas of the ruling class, including gender power relations, which shape the characters' attitudes towards their trauma and their interactions. The findings also reflect the solidity of gender power relations.

Keywords: trauma, 1965 tragedy, paradox, binary opposition, ideology

Introduction

The release and successive controversies over Joshua Oppenheimer-directed movie, *The Act of Killing*, in 2013, which was followed by *The Look of Silence*, imply a worldwide attention given to one of the bloodiest turmoil in the Indonesian history, the so-called 1965 Indonesian Communist Party Rebellion. Although the Indonesian government has not officially stated their position on the film, the fact that the movie has not been shown in public cinemas (Bastian, 1) represents the sensitivity and effects of the tragedy. The discussions on the painful event in the media as well as academic setting within and outside the country preceding its 50th commemoration coupled with the Indonesian government's silence led to expressions of concern, ordeal, trauma, somewhat anger and confusion besides agreements and disagreements.

If an event stays for half a century in the memory of other nations who were not part

of the event themselves, it must have left a deep, if not a permanent, mark in the memory of those directly or indirectly involved in it. In short, it must be a traumatic experience to them. "Traumas occur when individuals and groups feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their consciousness, will mark their memories forever, and will change their future in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander *et al.*, 1). Lay trauma theory considers trauma as a result of events themselves (2).

The 1965 tragedy does fit this notion as it has not only left a strongly implanted mark in the victims' memory, but also changed the life of the Indonesians as individuals and a nation. At national layer, the disbandment of the Indonesian Communist Party immediately after the purge and the recurrent calls of Communism as a latent danger positions Communism as a ghost haunting the nation. At individual level, one's affiliation to a religion is inevitable. Legally,

an Indonesian's identity card explicitly states the holder's religion. Socially (and legally), being an atheist is against the norms and law. Alexander Aan who publicly declared himself an atheist had to suffer from social and legal sanctions. He was imprisoned for more than 19 months before gaining his freedom on 27 January 2014 (Cochrane, 1). At work, he was beaten by a group of colleagues who learned about his posting of his belief on Facebook. In prison, some inmates who knew his case also beat him (Bulger, 1). Hence, the trauma is individual and cultural (Alexander, 1).

Once a victim of the 1965 turmoil himself as he had to serve a one-year imprisonment without trial in 1966 (Sulistyo 1), Martin Aleida acknowledged that the tragedy has left a deep impact on him so that it is a part of his self (Aleida qtd. in Isa, 4; Izzati, 2). In Alexander's terms, the tragedy seems to be a trauma for Aleida. This assumption is strengthened, observing Aleida's explanation in an interview with Left Book Review that a little spark related to the turmoil would inspire him to write about the tragedy from the perspective of the victims as he elaborates that it is 'the destiny of literature' to defend the victims (Aleida qtd. in Isa, 5; Izzati, 3). He adds that he would always express his memory of the tragedy in his writings to keep the nation's collective memory of the event (Sulistyo, 3). It is therefore interesting to examine how trauma is depicted in his work, who suffer from it, how they respond to such trauma, and the underlying ideology constructing the trauma.

Aleida's work "*Tanpa Pelayat dan Mawar Duka*" ("Without Mourners nor Roses"; hereafter TPMD) has been chosen as the object of this study. Portraying both the actor and victims of the tragedy, TPMD should provide sufficient information about how the characters are affected by the turmoil; thus, the trauma, how they interact with each other which reflects their response to the trauma. The deconstructive reading of the story is expected to reveal what construct the trauma.

Barry (71) explains that deconstructive reading "uncovers the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text ..." Derrida describes it as a reading which "

must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses ... attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight" (qtd. in Barry, 71). Therefore, the reading of the story would focus on several deconstructive strategies; i.e. the central tension, shift or break in the tension, paradox, and binary opposition.

The decision to do a deconstructive reading of TPMD was rooted in my reading about trauma, which reflects paradoxical concepts of trauma. Despite his discussion on lay trauma theory, Alexander *et. al.* (9) assert that events do not cause trauma. Shulga proposes that the term trauma simultaneously includes psychological illness, a historical event, and a collection of symptoms. However, both Alexander *et. al.* and Shulga later express their belief that trauma is not a result of history itself since both walk side by side (Alexander *et. al.*, 12) without direct causal relationship (Shulga 19).

Alexander *et. al.* maintain that lay trauma's notion of trauma as a result of events is a 'naturalistic fallacy' (8). He elaborates that events are not "... inherently traumatic" nor do they, "in and of themselves, create collective trauma because trauma is socially constructed" (8). Alexander *et. al.* and Shulga's attitude towards trauma is a contradiction to lay trauma theory.

Thompson compares trauma representation to writing a new narrative, which is highly contested and polarized (qtd. in Alexander, 12). Smelser elaborates that the contestation involves how the event should exactly be remembered. He used the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the presence of different groups in the American politics, such as veteran's and peace groups, who are "jockeying" over how the tragedy should be remembered as an example ("Cultural Trauma", 2). Such a contestation implies multiple interpretations of a text, which fits Derrida's notion that all texts have multiple meanings or interpretations (Derrida qtd. in Bressler, 1999: 129). As the notions of

trauma reflect contradictions, the story is also full of paradoxes.

Paradox in TPMD

Revolving around “Ba”, a supporting actor of the 1965 tragedy, his role in the turmoil, his fright as the political situation changed, death and funeral, TPMD actually portrays trauma and human relationships which are haunted by the memory of the tragedy. Therefore, there is a tension between the actors and the victims of the tragedy; i.e. “Ba” and the grave diggers whose fathers were allegedly accused to have killed the generals, arrested, interrogated, tortured, and murdered with Ba’s help (Aleida, 2007: 2).

The tension is reflected in the paradoxical title, Without Mourners nor Roses. Mourners and roses are parts of a social event called funeral. The absence of mourners including the grave diggers and roses in Ba’s funeral is a contradiction to the nature of a funeral. Instead of competing to offer their services as they usually did, the grave diggers sat on the red soil behind the frangipani trees, watching the coffin from a distance. Their wandering minds recalled the time their fathers were arrested and killed, their land was confiscated because of the dead man’s conspiracy with the armed people (Aleida, 2007: 2). As the sad loss of their father leaves an indelible mark in their conscious mind and changes their life reflects their trauma (Alexander *et. al.*: 1).

Another paradox reflecting hatred and tension lies in Ba’s willingness to have a proper place for his dead body when he died (Aleida, 2007: 1), as if he was fully aware there would be those who would not want him to be properly buried, and that they had a good reason for it. He realized that in to his friends he was no more than a bunch of meat which was only deserved to be stoned to death (Aleida, 2007: 1). Ba’s haunted mind represents itself in his changed attitude. Aleida writes, he pondered more frequently ... His uneasiness and fear led him to death (1), which portrays another trauma (Alexander *et. al.* 1).

With the shift of time, the tension is also shifted. Aleida writes,

Ke manapun dia pergi, di benaknya terbayang sebuah lubang ancaman. Begitu besar dan menakutkan, siap menelannya, menyusul tumbangannya raja tiranis yang berkuasa lebih dari tiga puluh tahun (Aleida, 2007: 1).

Wherever he went, that threatening hole was pictured in his mind. It was so huge and terrifying, ready to swallow him, as the tyrannical king who had ruled for more than three decades lost his throne (Aleida, 2007: 1).

Jatuhnya sang tiran dan perubahan politik yang tak pernah terbayangkan, dari hari ke sehari membuat hatinya semakin ciut, menggigil. Dia sadar akan apa yang telah dia lakukan terhadap teman-temannya selama ini. Dan betapa mencemaskan kemungkinan dendam yang harus dia hadapi (Aleida, 2007: 1).

Day by day, the fall of the tyrant and the unimaginable political change gradually took his courage and optimism away. His heart was chilling. He was aware of what he had done to his friends. And how frightening it was to think of the revenge he might have to deal with (Aleida, 2007: 1).

Conforming to Alexander *et. al* (8) and Shulga(19), TPMD clearly describes that the trauma is a social construction instead of a direct result of the events themselves. Ba realizes he has betrayed his friends, and his unforgivable deed should be the root of his trauma. However, it would never be a trauma if the more than three decade-ruling tyrant did not lose his power. In the past, Ba often treated his friends, the other artists (Aleida, 2007: 4); now he more often spent his time pondering (Aleida, 2007: 2). Ba changed following the fall of the tyrannical king (Aleida, 2007: 1). The shift in time or era portrays the domination of the ruling class. Ba used to scare them, now they scare him, creating another paradox.

Binary Oppositions in TPMD

Acting as the time break which shifts the trauma, the time the tyrant lost his throne divides the story into two parts, creating the first binary oppositions; i.e. past/present. Since the story depicts the relationship between Ba, a supporting actor of the 1965 tragedy, and his victims, the grave diggers, as communicated through the actor's wife, the other binary oppositions would be actor/victim and masculinity/femininity. The three pairs of binary oppositions are going to be used to dig out the hidden ideology in the story. Derrida declares binary oppositions are hierarchical since one element of the pair is always in superior position; thus, privileged; making the other element inferior or unprivileged (Bressler, 1999: 125; Tyson 254). The privileged member of the pair tells leads to the ideology underlying the text (Tyson 254). Examining the ways the binary oppositions overlap or have things in common or are not completely opposite will lead to the limitations of the ideology (Derrida qtd. in Tyson 254).

As the story begins by the description of Ba's, one of the actor in 1965 tragedy, fear following the fall of the long-governing tyrant and a long list of his horrendous past deeds, the story puts victim in a more privileged position; and, along with it, present over past and periphery over center. Ba's heartless cruelty is unforgivable that even his kindness means nothing. As Ba's wife admits, she knew exactly her husband's kindness is nothing compared to his betraying his friends (Aleida, 2007: 4). The past considers Ba a good citizen who helped the ruling government locate dissidents. However, the past belongs to a tyrant, turning anything positive under a tyrant's policy negative. This fits the principle of Deconstruction that language continually defers meaning and that the meaning language seems to have is determined by other signifiers (Tyson, 253); and words as a part of language escape meaning but produce meaning (Amani, 2). Likewise, Rivkin and Ryan state that "everything or object and every idea or concept refers to something else to be what it 'is'" (259). Ba, the good citizen of the past turns to be a condemned man for the grave diggers, a forgotten being

for those who needed his help in the past, a cruel, but faithful and generous husband for the woman. He may be perceived differently by the grave diggers or his wife and son after the burial.

The discussion also reflects that the past and present are never completely opposite. The past will not be called the past without the different present. Rivkin and Ryan maintain that "One present moment assumes past present moments as well as future present moments; to be "present," a present moment presupposes its difference from other presents" (258). The grave diggers' hatred towards Ba is rooted in his past actions but is only expressed when the political situation has changed as the tyrant abdicated and Ba has been forgotten by the armed people (Aleida, 2007: 1). Without a backup, Ba's "heroic" past behavior seems inhumane, fitting Deconstruction's principle that reality is textual as it is shaped by difference and its dependence on others to be what it is (Rivkin and Ryan 259).

The first binary oppositions, past and present influence the second binary oppositions; namely, actor and victim. Actor should be the privileged member of the pair because an actor is active. However, the term victim itself denotes powerlessness; thus, the need to be helped as a result of what the actor does. Therefore, victim will be the privileged member of the pair. TPMD shows that actor and victim are not completely opposite. Ba, the supporting actor of the tragedy has to bear the predicate of a victim by an unexpected socio-political change (Aleida, 2007: 1-2). He used to be in the center when he helped the group with weapon as well as when he was able to treat the other artists and bring *tumpeng* (rice cone with its dishes served as a part of Javanese tradition) to the cultural center on Indonesia's Independence Day (Aleida, 2007: 2,4). As the children of the victims, the grave diggers remain victims. Their occupation implies a paradox. They earn their living only when one loses their life. As such, they are never an actor because their survival is facilitated by one's inevitable surrender to death.

Yet, Ba, the actor, is also a victim of those with weapons, who had made use of him to maintain their power before they left him when he was not useful to them anymore (Aleida, 2007: 1). His life is also governed by the hidden dominating rules which turn his life into a nightmare along with the fall of the tyrannical king. With the reverse of the dominant ideology, his life is also reversed. He is then a victim of his own fear which is rooted in the social construction of what he had done. His quiet house and the deserted cemetery confirm his position as a victim of the different dominating rules (Aleida, 2007: 1-2). As an actor, he had to find his victim in their hiding places.

As a victim, he is considered to have extinct. Similarly, the grave diggers who were victims are changed into actors by the situation. They have decided to refuse to dig the soil for Ba, disabling Ba to have his last wish realized; i.e. to have a proper place for his dead body (Aleida, 2007: 1). Their choice is enabled by the dominant ideology which favors them. As Derrida believes, language, with which human beings organize their experience, reflects the implications, associations and contradictions of the ideologies shaping it (qtd. in Tyson 272).

The past/present and actor/victim pairs also confirms Derrida's notion that the identity of an object and idea is decided by its difference from the other objects or ideas. The discussion reveals that different ruling ideas as signified by the tyrant's loss of throne alter the hierarchy in the pairs; thus, changing how members of each pair are related and strengthening Deconstruction's belief that meaning is fluid and that truth is always incomplete (qtd. in Rivkin and Ryan 258).

Likewise, the absence of mourners and the grave diggers' determination to object giving service for Ba's last resting place puts Ba's wife in the position of a victim. As one outside the play but is related to one of the actors in the play, Ba's wife plays the role of a victim in the past as well as present. At present, her position is clearly depicted in the cemetery. Learning that she was the only mourner in the cemetery puts her in a

helpless, desperate situation. As the woman lamented to her dead husband, she felt mostly grieved not because of her husband's death, but what the man in the coffin did in the past and the effect of his past deeds (Aleida, 2007: 2—3).

"Ba, tak kusangka," bisiknya perlahan, ... "Oh, siapakah yang menyangka bisa jadi begini...?" ... Memang tak siapapun menyangka. ... Lihatlah! Taman pekuburan sungguh sepi. Para penggali kubur yang biasanya berebut menawarkan jasa, tak seorangpun kelihatan" (Aleida, 2007: 2).

"Ba, I have never thought this would happen," she whispered softly. ... "Oh, who has ever had an idea that this will happen?" ... No one really did. ... Look! The cemetery was completely deserted. Not even one of the grave diggers, who would usually compete to offer their service, could be seen (Aleida, 2007: 2).

Her grief is intensified when she found out that their only son did not return to attend his father's funeral, leaving her all alone and adding to the anguish she has kept to herself for more than three decades because of what her husband did (Aleida, 2007: 3). The grave digger's offer and empathy complicates her ordeal. Putting down a hoe near "Ba"'s wife's, the grave digger explained how he and his friends did not have the heart to see her sad and alone; but at the same time confirmed the need to punish "Ba" (Aleida, 2007: 4). His comforting words contain a paradox because human beings can only punish other human beings. The grave diggers' revenge to the dead Ba is actually directed to his wife.

The third binary oppositions is masculinity/femininity. This pair is represented in the grave digger who offered a hoe to Ba's wife and said that they did not have a choice. Having no choice is contrasted to having a choice, in which the later implies a privilege. However, since it is uttered by the grave diggers who were victims of the dead man, having no choice is the privileged member of the pair. Derrida argues that the binary oppositions are not always completely opposite (qtd. in Tyson, 254). Cutting short

the woman's empathy to their unfortunate fathers and explanation of her husband's little kindness, the grave digger said, "*Kami tak punya pilihan*" (Aleida, 2007: 4). ("We have no choice"). The statement "having no choice" actually implies choices the grave digger have taken; i.e. to be unwilling to listen to the woman's plea of her husband, to keep their opinion about Ba, and to ignore other possible options.

Instead, by leaving Ba's wife before she had finished her words (Aleida, 2007: 4), the grave digger did not give the woman any choice but to stop pleading for her dead husband. Even she has never had any choices in the past and present. Although she suffered greatly because of her husband's choice to support those with weapons, she had never intended to leave her husband.

Hatinya berkecamuk, tercabik-cabik, manakala teringat pada tahun-tahun yang tak tertahankan, yang harus dia lalui, lantaran perbuatan lelaki yang kini terpaku di dalam peti mati. ... Kabar tentang pendurhakaan itu datang tumpuk-menumpuk selama tiga puluh tahun lebih, membebani hati wanita yang sekarang berlutut di sisi peti mati suaminya. Dia hidup menyendiri, tersisih dari teman-temanya. Badannya kurus kering mengganggu malu (Aleida, 2007: 3).

She was restless, her heart broke into pieces, everytime he remembred the unbearable years, which she had go through because of what the man in the coffin did. ... The news about the betrayal reached her one after the other for more than 30 years, burdening the heart of the woman who were kneeling next to her husband's coffin. She led an isolated life, apart from his friends. She was "thin and dry", bearing the shame (Aleida, 2007: 3).

The news about her husband must have served like a very unpleasant event which has haunted her and changed her life forever; thus, trauma (Alexander *et. al.* 1). However, even after he husband had died, she had to cope with another form of embarrassment due to the man's past behavior, despite the

grave diggers' pitying her. Even she had to bury her husband herself (Aleida, 2007: 4). The revenge, which her husband feared in his later days, and which was a trauma for him (Aleida, 2007: 1), has been transferred to her, as if the trauma she suffered when her husband was still alive is not enough.

Her lonely life seems to be even lonelier. She used to put herself in the periphery, far from her friends who were in the center. She seems to still occupy the peripheral position as nobody has come to accompany her taking her husband to his grave. Their adopted son has not come, and neither has the artist her husband used to treat nor the group with weapons whom her husband used to help. The man who has never intended to leave her (Aleida, 2007: 4) has left her now, leaving her without any choice but not to leave him while the others, including their son, have chosen not to take him to his grave. In other words, it is she who has never intended to leave her husband. This proves what Derrida asserts that one's conception (what one thinks) precedes perception (what one's experience through her senses) and how her expectations, beliefs, and values—all of which are carried by language—determine the way she experiences her world (qtd. in Tyson 257).

Conclusion

Due to language ambiguity, TPMD has deconstructed itself to reveal that all characters suffer from trauma, which characterizes their interactions and response to life itself. Since the trauma is socially constructed, the characters' response and interactions are shaped by the dominant ideology, which is represented by the time shift in the story; i.e. the fall of the tyrant. However, the trauma the female character suffers is not affected by the time shift as she remains the victim who suffers from the trauma resulted from what people around her do and decide to do. The discussion also reveals that as the only female character, she is the only character with no choice. As this reflects the dominant concept of masculinity and femininity, the findings may point to the solid ideology of gender power relations

hidden in language. No matter how much a text deconstruct itself, this ideology remains.

References

- Aleida, Martin. "Tanpa Pelayat dan Mawar Duka". *Kumpulan Cerita Kompas*. 2007. Web. September 18, 2015.
- Alexander, Jeffrey. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma". In Jeffrey Alexander *et. al. Cultural Trauma*.
- Amani, Behnaz. "A Deconstructive Reading of Yasmina Reza's *Art*". *K@ta*. 16.1(2014). Web. 16 October 2015.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Chennai: T.R. Publication Pvt. Ltd. 2002. 2006.
- Bastian, Abdul Qowi. "'The Act of Killing' to be Released for Free Online in Indonesia". *The Jakarta Globe*. Web.
- Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism : An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall. 1999.
- Bulger, Matthew. "The Story of Alexander Aan: An Indonesian Atheist Fears for His Life". *Humanist Network News*. Web.
- Cochrane, Joe. "Embrace of Atheism Put an Indonesian in Prison". *The New York Times*. Web. 3 May, 2014. 29 September 2015.
- Cultural Trauma: An Interview. Regents of the University of California. 2005. Web. 22 May, 2015.
- Isa, Ibrahim. "Martin Aleida tentang Tragedi '65 dan Permintaan Maaf". 26 April 2012. Blog. 29 September, 2015.
- Izzati, Fildzah Fatimah. "Martin Aleida: Takdir Sastra adalah Membela Korban." *Left Book Review*. XIX. (2014). 15 February 2014. Web. 18 August 2015.
- Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael (Eds). *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. MA, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. 2004.
- Sulistyo, Bambang. "Nama Baru untuk Bernapas". *Gatra*. 23 January 2004. Web. 29 September 2015.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge. 2006.