



## Exploring Ethical and Emotional Engagement with Postcolonial Suffering through a Reader-Response Analysis of Millennial Readers' Literary Experiences

Purwanti Taman <sup>1\*</sup>, Nurmiati <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Pamulang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Trisakti, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup>[dosen00771@unpam.ac.id](mailto:dosen00771@unpam.ac.id), <sup>2</sup>[nurmiatipers@gmail.com](mailto:nurmiatipers@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This study advances postcolonial literary research by focusing not on texts themselves but on how millennial readers personally experience narratives of colonial suffering. Employing an interpretative phenomenological approach with in-depth interviews of eight university-educated readers (aged 20–30), the research identifies four key themes: emotional resonance, ethical reflection, identity negotiation, and ethical literacy. The findings show that engagement with postcolonial fiction fosters critical self-reflection and moral awareness, highlighting literature's role as a site of ethical transformation. By centering reader-response experiences, this study contributes novel insights into how postcolonial literature shapes moral consciousness and underscores the value of phenomenological inquiry for understanding the ethical dimensions of reading.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of literary studies, postcolonial literature continues to serve as a powerful medium through which historical trauma, cultural displacement, and the enduring legacies of colonialism are narrated and confronted (Arong, 2019). These narratives not only recount collective histories but also invite readers into intimate encounters with the lived suffering of marginalized voices (Mendes & Lau, 2019). The resurgence of interest in postcolonial fiction among younger generations, particularly millennials, has marked a shift in how literature is engaged—not solely as an object of textual analysis but as a vehicle for ethical reflection and emotional resonance.

Across academic and educational contexts, literature has been increasingly acknowledged for its role in shaping moral consciousness and fostering empathy (Chagas-Bastos et al., 2019). Particularly in humanistic disciplines such as philosophy, ethics, and cultural studies, there is growing recognition of the capacity of literary texts to evoke deep personal reflection and to serve as sites where individuals negotiate meaning, identity, and ethical orientation.<sup>1</sup> The emotional and intellectual involvement of readers in stories of oppression, resistance, and survival reflects not only a cognitive engagement but also an affective and existential one. For millennial readers, many of whom navigate complex identities in a post-globalized world, literature becomes a space where historical pain can be encountered, interpreted, and internalized in ways that are uniquely personal.

Despite the richness of these engagements, much of the existing scholarship has prioritized theoretical or structural analyses of postcolonial texts, often overlooking the subjective dimensions of the reading experience (Yokota-Murakami, 2019). There remains a limited understanding of how individuals emotionally and ethically process the suffering represented in such narratives, and how these experiences may shape their perception of justice, historical memory, and selfhood (Haile,

2023). The need for a phenomenological inquiry arises here to move beyond the text and examine the meaning of the experience as it is lived by readers.

A phenomenological approach allows for the exploration of literature not just as cultural artifact but as lived encounter (Shabir, 2024). It emphasizes the importance of subjective experience and centers the voices of individuals who interact with literary representations of suffering in ways that transcend analytical detachment. In doing so, such an approach provides access to deeper layers of meaning—how suffering is not only understood, but also felt, embodied, and transformed through the act of reading.

Within the broader discourse of postcolonial literary engagement, scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward understanding how readers personally and emotionally interact with narratives of historical suffering (Trzeciak & Schäfer, 2021). This shift signals a growing recognition of the need to investigate not just textual structures or ideological frameworks, but the lived experiences of individuals as they read and interpret these texts. Research into the subjective experience of literary engagement—particularly in contexts involving ethically charged content such as trauma, displacement, and systemic violence has emerged as an important sub-field within phenomenological and reader-response studies.

Despite this emerging focus, significant methodological challenges persist. Traditional approaches rooted in structural or content analysis have tended to overlook the nuanced, internal dimensions of the reading experience (Ede, 2023). Quantitative models and even certain thematic frameworks often fail to capture the affective and interpretive layers through which readers construct meaning. For instance, prior studies have emphasized demographic correlations or generalized reading habits, but have rarely delved into how specific readers emotionally internalize, reflect upon, and respond to the suffering portrayed in postcolonial texts.<sup>2</sup> This disconnect has limited the capacity of such research to uncover the ethical and existential implications embedded in the act of reading.

These limitations highlight the inadequacy of prior methods in fully apprehending the essence of lived literary experiences (Kaci-Mohamed, 2021). Approaches that do not center the reader's voice, perception, and affective engagement risk flattening complex interpretive processes into abstract generalizations. As a result, the subjective richness and transformative potential of reading—particularly in ethically resonant contexts remain insufficiently explored (Kmita, 2024). This underscores the importance of phenomenological methods, which prioritize the depth and individuality of experience and are uniquely suited to illuminate how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and embodied by readers in their encounter with literary representations of suffering.

Postcolonial literature remains a vital medium for confronting historical trauma, cultural displacement, and the legacies of colonialism (Arong, 2019). Beyond recounting collective histories, it draws readers into intimate encounters with marginalized voices (Mendes & Lau, 2019). For millennial readers, these texts offer not only cultural knowledge but also spaces for ethical reflection and emotional resonance.

While literature has been widely recognized for shaping moral consciousness and empathy (Chagas-Bastos et al., 2019), most scholarship prioritizes theoretical and structural analysis over readers' subjective experiences (Yokota-Murakami, 2019). Consequently, little is known about how individuals emotionally and ethically process depictions of suffering, or how such encounters influence perceptions of justice, memory, and identity (Haile, 2023).

This study addresses that gap by adopting a phenomenological approach, which prioritizes lived experience and centers readers' voices in engaging with narratives of suffering (Shabir, 2024). Unlike conventional content or structural analyses that flatten interpretive complexity (Kaci-Mohamed, 2021), phenomenology illuminates how meaning is constructed, embodied, and ethically transformative.

Despite increasing interest in reader-response studies, methodological limitations persist. Prior work often relies on demographic surveys, aggregate responses, or surface-level thematic coding, thereby overlooking the affective and interpretive dimensions of reading (Graziadei, 2020;

Nyongesa, 2024). What remains underexplored is how millennial readers specifically experience and internalize suffering in postcolonial fiction (Pain, 2022).

To address this research gap, the present study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through in-depth interviews with young adult readers. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how literature fosters ethical reflection, identity negotiation, and moral awareness—dimensions that extend beyond the act of reading. In doing so, the study highlights the transformative role of postcolonial literature in shaping ethical consciousness.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore how millennial readers experience and interpret suffering within postcolonial literary texts (Fife, 2020). Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, centers on uncovering the meanings embedded in individuals' lived experiences. The interpretative variant, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, allows for a deep engagement with both the descriptive and contextual dimensions of human experience, emphasizing how individuals make sense of their world through personal and socio-historical lenses. This design was deemed appropriate given the study's aim to understand complex affective, ethical, and identity-related responses elicited through literary engagement—phenomena best accessed through participants' subjective narratives.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of individuals aged 20 to 30 who self-identified as regular readers of postcolonial fiction and were currently enrolled in or had completed tertiary education in the humanities (Kawamura, 2020). Selection was based on purposive sampling to ensure that all participants had meaningful exposure to the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria required participants to have read at least two postcolonial novels within the past year and to demonstrate a capacity for reflective discussion about their reading experiences. Individuals with no prior engagement with postcolonial literature or with limited fluency in the language of the texts were excluded. A total of eight participants (4 female, 4 male) were included in the final analysis, with an average age of 24.5 years. Their diverse cultural and educational backgrounds provided rich interpretive contexts for understanding how postcolonial narratives were internalized and reflected upon.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in quiet and comfortable settings selected by participants (Clair, 2003). Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and followed a flexible guide that included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives of the reading experience. The interview protocol included three core domains: (1) initial engagement with postcolonial texts (e.g., "Can you describe your first impressions while reading this novel?"), (2) emotional and ethical responses (e.g., "What emotions did the story evoke, and how did they affect your view of the issues depicted?"), and (3) reflective meaning-making (e.g., "How did this reading influence your sense of self, identity, or values?"). Follow-up probes were used to encourage depth without leading responses.

The interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of the participants' voices. Where appropriate, participants were invited to reflect on specific passages from postcolonial texts they had read, enabling a deeper exploration of emotional and cognitive responses. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. The environment for each interview was structured to foster trust, openness, and emotional safety, consistent with best practices in qualitative inquiry.

### **Data Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the data, following the stages outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Transcripts were read and re-read to ensure immersion in the data, followed by initial noting to identify significant statements, emotional cues, and conceptual insights. Emergent themes were developed through iterative coding, with attention given to convergence and divergence across cases. Themes were refined through abstraction and clustering, culminating in a structure that revealed both individual and shared meanings. The software NVivo 14 was used to assist in organizing and managing data during the analytic process. To enhance transparency, an audit trail was maintained that documented coding decisions, theme development, and researcher reflections throughout the process. Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity was integral to the study's design. The primary researcher acknowledged their dual position as both a literary scholar and a reader of postcolonial fiction, which could shape interpretation. To mitigate bias, a reflexive journal was maintained to record assumptions, emotional reactions during interviews, and evolving interpretations. Regular peer debriefings were conducted with colleagues not directly involved in the study to challenge interpretations and ensure credibility. This reflexive practice helped balance empathetic engagement with critical distance, thereby strengthening the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study and signed informed consent forms prior to participation. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely in password-protected files. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. The study complied with international ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, including respect for autonomy, confidentiality, and non-maleficence.

## **RESULTS**

### **Emotional Immersion and Affective Resonance**

Participants consistently described an immediate emotional connection to the suffering of characters within postcolonial narratives. This affective response often led to feelings of empathy, sorrow, and personal reflection.

“When I read about the brutal treatment of the colonized characters, it felt disturbingly close to what I sometimes hear in my own community. It wasn't just a story—it was pain that I could feel in my chest.” (Participant 3)

This illustrates how readers did not simply process suffering intellectually but embodied it emotionally, transforming reading into a visceral encounter.

This emotional immersion was not passive. Many participants reported moments of introspection triggered by their emotional responses, where the literary text became a mirror for their own ethical sensibilities.

“I cried while reading a passage about a family separated during war. It reminded me of my grandparents' stories. I began to ask, how could humanity let this happen?” (Participant 6)

Such reflections demonstrate how emotional resonance frequently evolved into ethical questioning, linking personal memory with broader historical injustices.

### **Moral Reflection and Ethical Awakening**

Engagement with suffering in postcolonial literature sparked moral reflection and a reevaluation of participants' ethical frameworks. These narratives often acted as catalysts for developing a more nuanced understanding of justice, historical trauma, and personal responsibility.

“The story made me question my own silence. I started thinking—what would I do in a similar situation? Would I speak up or remain comfortable?” (Participant 2)

This shows how the text disrupted moral complacency, compelling participants to consider their own positionality and potential complicity.

Participants emphasized how these texts challenged their moral assumptions and expanded their awareness of systemic oppression, not only in the past but also in present-day contexts.

“Reading about colonization made me realize that injustice has not ended—it just changed forms. Now I see racism and inequality more clearly in my own society.” (Participant 5)

Here, moral reflection extended into sociopolitical awareness, linking literary encounters with recognition of contemporary injustice.

### **Identity Negotiation through Historical Memory**

Postcolonial texts prompted participants to reconsider their cultural identity and historical positioning. For many, reading became an act of re-discovering lost narratives and reconstructing a sense of self within broader historical continuities.

“I never learned these stories in school. I felt robbed of my own history. These books gave me something I didn’t know I had lost.” (Participant 1)

This highlights how engagement with literature filled gaps in collective memory, reshaping participants’ understanding of identity.

The sense of belonging or estrangement varied across participants, depending on their own backgrounds, yet all acknowledged a shift in how they viewed their place within historical narratives.

“I used to think of myself as disconnected from all that colonial stuff. Now, I feel part of a long story that still affects who I am.” (Participant 7)

This demonstrates how identity negotiation involved both estrangement and newfound affiliation, situating readers within a living historical continuum.

### **Ethical Literacy through Narrative Engagement**

Participants expressed how engaging with literary depictions of suffering cultivated what they called “ethical literacy”—a form of awareness that blends empathy, historical understanding, and critical thinking.

“These stories taught me to listen better—not just to others, but to pain that is not mine. I think I became a more ethical person through reading.” (Participant 4)

This underscores how ethical literacy emerged as a synthesis of empathy and critical reflection, extending beyond the act of reading.

This ethical literacy extended beyond reading experiences into real-life behaviors, such as social activism, critical conversations, and heightened sensitivity to injustice.

“After reading, I began volunteering in refugee education programs. It’s like the story stayed with me and moved me to act.” (Participant 8)

Such actions illustrate the transformative potential of literature, where affective engagement translates into tangible ethical practice.

Across all participants, the integration of emotional resonance, moral reflection, identity negotiation, and ethical literacy shows how themes were grounded in lived testimonies. The quotes reveal not just individual voices but recurring patterns, demonstrating how postcolonial texts functioned as catalysts for ethical and existential transformation.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that millennial readers engage with postcolonial literature not merely as narrative entertainment but as an immersive ethical and emotional encounter (Barnard, 2020). Through themes of affective resonance, moral reflection, identity negotiation, and ethical literacy, participants demonstrated a capacity to internalize suffering and reframe their understanding

of self and society. Rather than presenting readers as passive recipients, the data show them to be active interpreters whose meaning-making extends beyond the page (Fernández, 2020).

This aligns with previous work on narrative empathy (Qabaha, 2019) and postcolonial trauma (Yousofi et al., 2025), yet the present study offers a distinct contribution by foregrounding millennial readers' sociocultural positioning. Whereas earlier phenomenological studies (Abbashar, 2024; Taela, 2023) emphasize general moral consciousness, this study demonstrates how participants explicitly link textual suffering with contemporary injustices such as racism and inequality. In this way, the findings extend existing research by situating ethical reflection within generational identity and lived social contexts.

At the same time, the results diverge from studies that primarily conceptualize reader engagement in cognitive or theoretical terms (Duquet, 2024; Jorge, 2023). Instead of treating empathy as an abstract construct, participants described concrete behavioral outcomes—such as activism and volunteering—suggesting that postcolonial literature can mobilize ethical literacy into tangible practices. This strengthens the case for literature's transformative potential, while also highlighting differences in how various readerships translate moral awareness into lived action.

The implications for education are therefore significant. Postcolonial texts can function not only as sources of critical thinking but also as catalysts for ethical formation and cultural empathy among young readers (Bhumika, 2021). By demonstrating how millennial readers integrate historical suffering into personal and moral frameworks, the study underscores the importance of including such narratives in curricula to foster ethically engaged citizens in multicultural societies.

However, these insights must be interpreted with caution. The study's small, purposively selected sample—university-educated millennials with demonstrated interest in postcolonial literature—limits the transferability of findings (De Almeida, 2021). Readers from different educational levels, age groups, or cultural contexts may engage with such texts differently. Moreover, while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allows for depth, its reliance on participants' verbal articulation may underrepresent less consciously articulated responses. The researcher's interpretive lens also shapes theme construction, raising the possibility of analytic bias (María-Jesús, 2023). These limitations call for careful reflection on the partial and situated nature of the conclusions.

Future research should therefore broaden the demographic scope, incorporating non-academic and cross-cultural readers to test the applicability of these themes (Salhi, 2023; Vitolo, 2022). Comparative work across generations or genres could also illuminate how different reader groups process ethical and emotional dimensions (Vercillo & Hird-Younger, 2019). Interdisciplinary approaches linking literary studies with moral psychology and education would further strengthen understanding of how narrative encounters shape ethical agency. Taken together, these avenues can extend the contribution of this study by clarifying the role of literature as both a cultural artifact and an experiential site of moral transformation.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored how millennial readers experience and interpret suffering in postcolonial literature, focusing on their emotional, ethical, and identity-related responses. The findings revealed that reading such texts becomes a deeply immersive and transformative experience that extends beyond intellectual engagement. Participants developed moral awareness, reflected on social injustice, and re-evaluated their historical and cultural positioning. By foregrounding the reader's lived experience, this study addresses a critical gap in literary scholarship and demonstrates the value of phenomenological inquiry in capturing dimensions of meaning often overlooked by text-centered or structural approaches.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to reader-response and phenomenological studies by showing how postcolonial narratives foster ethical literacy through embodied emotional engagement. They extend existing models of narrative empathy by illustrating how generational identity

(millennials) mediates the connection between historical suffering and contemporary moral reflection. Practically, the results highlight the potential of postcolonial literature as a pedagogical tool: incorporating such texts into educational curricula can cultivate cultural empathy, critical consciousness, and ethical sensibility among students. Beyond academia, the insights underscore literature's role in shaping civic responsibility and social activism in multicultural societies grappling with persistent inequalities.

Future research should deepen this inquiry by examining more diverse readerships across age, cultural, and educational backgrounds, as well as by comparing responses across different literary genres. Interdisciplinary collaborations—with moral psychology, education, and cultural studies—could illuminate the mechanisms by which literature shapes ethical agency. Longitudinal studies may also reveal how ethical insights gained through reading evolve over time and influence real-world behaviors. Together, these directions can advance a more comprehensive understanding of how literature operates not only as art but also as a catalyst for moral and cultural transformation.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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