



## Readers' Lived Experiences and Meaning-Making of Collective Trauma in Literary Narratives

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### ABSTRACT

Literature serves as a powerful medium for preserving cultural memory and negotiating collective trauma, enabling readers to engage with historical narratives on emotional and cognitive levels. Within this broader context, this study focuses on how readers interpret and internalize representations of historical trauma and identity reconstruction through Laksmi Pamuntjak's novel *Amba*. While previous studies have largely emphasized textual analysis or authorial perspectives, little is known about readers' lived experiences when encountering literary depictions of traumatic histories. Addressing this gap, this study highlights the novelty of examining readers' meaning-making processes as an essential dimension of collective memory studies. Here, we apply Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore readers' subjective experiences and reveal the essential meanings behind their engagement with the text. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve participants who had read *Amba* and analyzed using a systematic, iterative approach to identify emerging themes. The findings demonstrate four interconnected experiential dimensions: embodied experiences of historical wounds, negotiation of cultural identity, emotional resonance and empathic imagination, and literature as a catalyst for collective remembrance. These findings advance prior scholarship by shifting the focus from textual representation to readers' experiential engagement, thereby offering a novel contribution to trauma and memory studies. This study enhances our understanding of how literature mediates identity formation and cultural belonging, offering theoretical insights for phenomenological research and practical implications for educators, cultural practitioners, and policymakers. By centering on readers' perspectives, this work contributes new methodological and conceptual approaches to the study of trauma narratives. Future studies may extend these findings by comparing multiple texts or exploring cross-cultural contexts to deepen perspectives on meaning-making and collective memory.



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## INTRODUCTION

The intersection between literature, cultural memory, and collective trauma has become a significant area of inquiry within the broader field of humanities, particularly in studies focusing on the phenomenology of lived experiences (Kumar, 2025; Saheed et al., 2024). Literature has long served as a cultural medium through which societies preserve, negotiate, and reconstruct historical narratives, providing a symbolic space where personal and collective identities intersect. Within this context, narratives surrounding historical events such as political violence, forced displacement, and silenced memories do not merely represent factual accounts but become deeply embodied experiences for readers who engage with them. Through stories, readers are invited to reimagine the past and internalize the emotional and moral complexities embedded within it, enabling literature to function both as a repository of cultural memory and as a catalyst for identity formation.

In the Indonesian context, the 1965 political tragedy remains one of the most complex and sensitive historical events, marked by deep social, cultural, and political ruptures (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Despite its profound impact on individuals and communities, public

discourse surrounding the tragedy has often been fragmented or silenced, resulting in gaps within intergenerational memory transmission. For many, literature has become an alternative medium through which suppressed narratives can resurface and be reinterpreted. Novels such as *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak, which situates personal stories within broader socio-political histories, invite readers to engage emotionally with collective trauma and reflect on its ongoing influence in shaping cultural identities.

From a phenomenological perspective, the significance of this phenomenon lies in its subjective dimension—the way readers internalize, interpret, and make meaning of historical trauma through their interactions with literary texts (Ahmad, 2025; Earl-Castillo, 2023). Unlike objective historical analyses, phenomenology seeks to illuminate how individuals experience and live through these narratives within their own consciousness. The reading of literature, particularly texts that engage with sensitive cultural memories, often elicits embodied responses—including empathy, identification, and emotional resonance—that go beyond intellectual comprehension. These experiences not only shape personal understandings of the past but also influence the broader social and cultural dynamics surrounding memory and identity.

Despite increasing scholarly attention, there remains a limited understanding of how readers negotiate their sense of self, belonging, and collective identity through encounters with narratives of trauma and memory (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Existing studies have primarily focused on historical reconstructions or textual analyses, leaving less explored the lived experiences of readers who actively engage with these representations. Addressing this gap requires an approach that prioritizes the voices of participants and captures the essence of their meaning-making processes. A phenomenological inquiry, therefore, offers a critical lens to investigate how individuals relate to complex cultural narratives, how they internalize emotional dimensions of collective trauma, and how literature becomes a space where personal and collective memories converge.

By situating this study within the broader discourse of phenomenology, literature, and cultural memory, the research emphasizes the need to explore readers' lived experiences as they engage with representations of historical trauma. Such an exploration provides insights into how literature functions as a site for identity negotiation, emotional resonance, and collective remembrance processes that are central not only to understanding individual consciousness but also to appreciating the cultural dynamics that shape social meaning.

Building upon the broader discourse on literature, cultural memory, and collective trauma, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the importance of exploring readers' lived experiences when engaging with literary narratives (Dionisio & Carr, 2022; Walton, 2021). Within this sub-area, phenomenology has emerged as a critical framework for investigating how individuals perceive, interpret, and internalize complex cultural meanings conveyed through texts. In contrast to textual or historical analyses that primarily examine authorial intent or narrative structures, phenomenological inquiry focuses on the subjective dimension of experience, seeking to uncover the personal and emotional meanings readers construct during their encounters with literature.

However, methodological challenges remain in capturing these deeply subjective experiences (Buravsky & Kozlovets, 2025; Goswami, 2023; Scherer, 2022). Many existing studies on collective trauma and cultural memory have relied on quantitative surveys or structured questionnaires, which, while useful for mapping broader patterns, often fail to capture the depth and richness of individual meaning-making. Similarly, approaches grounded in textual analysis tend to prioritize the representation of trauma within the text itself rather than examining how readers embody and negotiate these narratives within their personal and cultural contexts. These limitations highlight the difficulty of accessing the emotional and existential dimensions of participants' engagement with literature using conventional research designs.

Consequently, prior methodologies have struggled to provide a comprehensive understanding of the essence of the phenomenon—how readers construct, inhabit, and transform meaning when confronted with representations of cultural trauma (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). While thematic and content analyses contribute to identifying recurring motifs, they often

neglect the embodied, affective, and interpretative dimensions that are central to readers' lived experiences. Addressing these methodological constraints requires a research approach that privileges participants' voices, recognizes the uniqueness of individual perspectives, and attends to the complex interplay between personal memory, collective identity, and narrative empathy.

By situating this study within the interpretative phenomenological framework, the research responds to the need for a methodologically rigorous yet experientially sensitive approach. The application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) enables the investigation of how readers construct meaning through their engagement with *Amba*, revealing the intricate relationships between literature, memory, identity, and cultural belonging. This methodological orientation not only provides insight into the emotional depth of participants' responses but also addresses existing gaps in understanding how literature functions as a medium for negotiating historical trauma and fostering collective remembrance.

Although literature has long been recognized as a powerful medium for preserving and negotiating collective memory and historical trauma, most existing studies have predominantly adopted practical and textual approaches to understanding these phenomena. For instance, research on cultural memory often relies on content analysis and narrative structural models that primarily examine authorial intent or thematic patterns within the text. Similarly, psychological perspectives on collective trauma tend to utilize quantitative surveys or standardized instruments that focus on measuring trauma responses across larger populations. While these approaches contribute valuable insights, they remain limited in capturing the depth of meaning and subjective dimensions embedded in readers' lived experiences.

One critical limitation of these existing frameworks lies in their inability to explore how individuals personally interpret and embody the narratives they encounter (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Text-centered analyses often neglect the dynamic process through which readers relate to traumatic histories, reconstruct cultural identities, and engage emotionally with literary representations of collective suffering. Moreover, quantitative methodologies, by emphasizing measurable variables and generalized findings, frequently overlook the unique, nuanced, and context-specific meanings constructed by participants. As a result, the emotional resonance, empathic imagination, and identity negotiation processes experienced by readers remain underexplored in current scholarship.

To address these gaps, a methodological shift is necessary—one that privileges participants' voices and centers the lived experience as the foundation of inquiry. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers a robust framework for investigating the essence of subjective meaning-making, enabling researchers to illuminate how readers interpret, internalize, and transform their understanding of collective trauma and cultural memory through literature. By focusing on participants' personal narratives, this approach provides a holistic, experiential, and contextually grounded understanding of the phenomenon, capturing dimensions that traditional methodologies have been unable to reveal.

This study, therefore, responds to the absence of in-depth qualitative research exploring how readers construct meaning from literary representations of historical trauma within the Indonesian cultural context. By adopting a phenomenological perspective, it aims to fill the existing knowledge gap and contribute new insights into how literature functions as a mediator of memory, an emotional catalyst, and a space for identity negotiation.

Recent studies have highlighted the role of literature in shaping readers' understanding of cultural memory and collective trauma. Prior research has examined how narratives influence social identity formation, emotional responses, and intergenerational memory transmission (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). However, most of these studies have relied on textual analysis or quantitative surveys, which provide limited insight into how readers personally interpret and embody these narratives. Existing literature has yet to adequately explain how individual readers construct meaning and negotiate their sense of identity through encounters with traumatic historical representations. This study builds upon these gaps by focusing on lived experiences, providing a deeper exploration of subjective engagement with literary texts.

To address these gaps, this research adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the primary methodological framework. IPA is particularly suitable for exploring how individuals make sense of their personal experiences when engaging with literature, especially in contexts involving complex cultural and historical themes. This approach allows the study to illuminate how readers interpret, internalize, and respond emotionally to narratives of collective trauma and memory. By focusing on personal narratives, IPA captures the essence of meaning-making that traditional methodologies have often overlooked. Through this method, the study seeks to answer the core question raised in the previous section: how do readers construct meaning from literary representations of historical trauma and cultural memory?

The article is structured into several sections to guide readers through the study logically and systematically. The Introduction outlines the theoretical foundations and situates the research within current scholarly debates. The Method section explains the phenomenological approach, including participant selection, data collection, and analytic procedures. The Results section presents findings derived from thematic interpretations of participants' experiences, supported by direct quotations to ensure authenticity. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion sections synthesize the findings, connect them to existing literature, and highlight the study's contributions to the understanding of literature, cultural memory, and identity construction.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore readers' subjective experiences in engaging with representations of collective trauma and cultural memory within *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experiences and the meanings participants attribute to them (Clair, 2003; Fenton & Baxter, 2016). Within the interpretative framework inspired by Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, this design emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretive engagement. By adopting this approach, the study aimed to illuminate the essence of the phenomenon, enabling a nuanced understanding of how readers internalize, negotiate, and reconstruct cultural memory through literary encounters.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of individuals with experiences relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Daly, 2007; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). Eligibility required that participants had completed reading *Amba* in its entirety, were aged between 21 and 55 years, and possessed sufficient literacy skills to articulate personal reflections. Furthermore, participants needed to express willingness to discuss emotional and interpretive responses related to the novel's themes. Those unfamiliar with the historical context surrounding the 1965 political events or those uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues related to collective trauma were excluded.

A total of 12 participants contributed to the study, comprising seven females and five males, with an average age of 33.6 years. Participants represented diverse academic and socio-cultural backgrounds, enabling a rich and multifaceted understanding of how literature influences cultural memory and identity formation.

### **Data Collection**

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' personal narratives and reflective interpretations of their reading experiences (Iosifides, 2016; Longhofer et al., 2012). The interview protocol was developed based on key themes related to trauma, identity, cultural memory, and empathic engagement, ensuring consistency across sessions while maintaining flexibility to accommodate participants' unique perspectives.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in private and comfortable settings to encourage openness and emotional safety. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. During and after each interview, field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues, contextual details, and emotional dynamics that complemented the verbal data. To ensure accuracy, interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all transcripts were anonymized prior to analysis. Member checking was performed by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to validate the accuracy and authenticity of the findings.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework through a systematic, iterative, and inductive process (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Migdal, 2018). The analysis began with multiple readings of the transcripts to achieve immersion in the data and to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences. Significant statements were identified and segmented into meaning units, which were then coded and grouped into preliminary categories. These categories were clustered into broader themes that reflected shared patterns of experience across participants.

Following this, a cross-case analysis was conducted to compare interpretations and identify both convergences and divergences among participants (Borcsa & Rober, 2015; McNabb, 2015). Finally, the thematic structures were synthesized to highlight the essential experiential meanings that captured the phenomenon's core essence. NVivo 14 software was utilized to manage the transcripts and organize coding efficiently, while reflexive journaling was maintained to enhance transparency and reduce interpretive bias throughout the analytic process.

## RESULTS

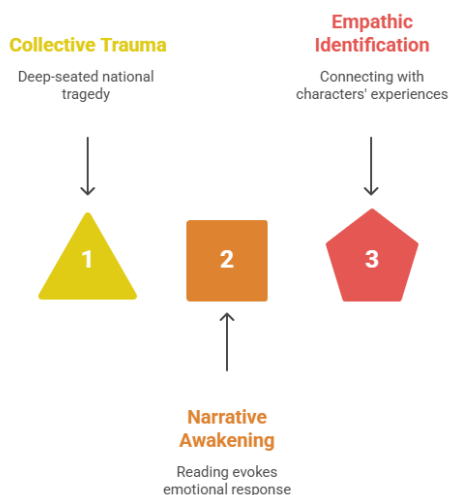
### Embodied Experiences of Historical Wounds

Participants revealed that reading Amba evoked an embodied emotional response, reflecting how the narrative awakened deep-seated collective memories related to the 1965 political tragedy. These experiences were described as personal encounters with national trauma:

“When I read about Bhisma's imprisonment, I felt as if I was reliving my grandfather's untold story. It was not just literature; it was our silent history speaking to me.” (P3)

Several participants noted a sense of empathic identification with the characters, suggesting that the novel served as a medium to bridge the gap between collective past and individual present. This indicates that cultural memory is not merely intellectual but deeply embodied within emotional consciousness.

### From Collective Past to Individual Present



### **Negotiating Cultural Identity Through Narrative**

The second theme highlights how participants negotiated their sense of cultural identity while engaging with the novel. For many, *Amba* became a reflective space to reinterpret what it means to belong to a collective memory shaped by historical violence:

“Before reading this novel, I only knew the history as something distant. But now, I feel connected to it as if I carry part of that memory within me.” (P5)

Through narrative immersion, participants engaged in a dialogue with their cultural past, reconstructing fragmented memories into a cohesive identity. The text acted as a cultural mirror, allowing them to locate personal meaning within the broader context of Indonesian historical trauma.

### **Emotional Resonance and Empathic Imagination**

A recurring experience among participants was the emotional resonance triggered by symbolic representations of suffering and resilience within the novel. Many described how the narrative invited them to imagine lives shaped by displacement, betrayal, and survival:

“The scene where *Amba* reads *Bhisma*’s letter broke me. I could feel her longing, her pain, her silence. I became part of her world.” (P7)

This empathic imagination fostered a vicarious participation in the characters’ struggles, enabling readers to internalize trauma not experienced firsthand. The phenomenological significance lies in how literature transports readers into the lived worlds of others, thereby expanding their moral and emotional understanding.

### **Literature as a Catalyst for Collective Remembrance**

Participants consistently emphasized that *Amba* functioned as more than a literary artifact; it became a catalyst for collective remembrance. The novel provoked discussions within families, communities, and social groups about untold histories, silenced traumas, and intergenerational wounds:

“After finishing the book, I asked my parents about their memories of 1965. For the first time, they opened up about things they had hidden for decades.” (P2)

This illustrates how literature operates as a cultural conduit, mediating between suppressed historical narratives and contemporary identity formation. The phenomenological meaning lies in the recognition that reading is a transformative act—one that reconnects individuals to a collective cultural consciousness.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The findings provide a comprehensive response to the central research question: how do readers construct meaning from literary representations of historical trauma and cultural memory? Through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study uncovered how participants engaged with the narrative on multiple levels—cognitive, emotional, and existential. The theme of embodied experiences demonstrates that readers did not merely interpret events intellectually but felt the trauma as part of their personal and cultural identity, suggesting that literature activates a deeply personal connection to collective histories. Similarly, the theme of identity negotiation highlights that reading *Amba* prompted participants to reassess their sense of belonging, cultural heritage, and familial narratives in relation to the broader Indonesian historical context.

Furthermore, the themes of emotional resonance and empathic imagination reveal that literature serves as an affective bridge between individual readers and historical experiences they did not directly witness. By internalizing characters’ suffering and resilience, participants accessed new dimensions of self-awareness and cultural understanding. These findings demonstrate that literary engagement is not a passive act but an active process of meaning-making, where readers reinterpret personal and collective identities through narrative immersion. Therefore, the study contributes a

unique perspective by capturing how literature facilitates a dialogical relationship between past and present, self and community, and memory and identity.

### **Connection to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**

The findings align with and extend existing scholarship on phenomenology, literature, and cultural memory. Consistent with noor, (2025) assertion that literature functions as a “cultural archive,” participants’ experiences illustrate how narratives act as repositories of suppressed histories and enable readers to confront silenced traumas. Similarly, the embodied responses observed in this study support Pain, (2022) claim that collective trauma is physiologically and emotionally internalized, demonstrating that literary encounters can evoke similar embodied sensations even among readers distant from the events themselves.

The findings also complement Ottaway et al., (2025) perspective on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between participants and researchers. This study advances IPA scholarship by showing how literary texts mediate readers’ lived experiences, enabling them to reframe personal narratives within collective cultural frameworks. At the same time, the results diverge from purely textual analyses of trauma narratives, which often prioritize authorial intent or structural representations of suffering. Instead, this study highlights that the reader’s experiential engagement is central to understanding literature’s impact on collective memory.

By integrating phenomenological theory with empirical insights, this research demonstrates that literature provides a transformative space where individuals reconstruct cultural belonging and identity through their encounters with traumatic histories. These findings underscore the necessity of phenomenological approaches to fully capture the nuanced processes of meaning-making that traditional methodologies frequently overlook.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical, cultural, and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, the results enrich phenomenological understandings of how literature mediates the relationship between personal identity and collective memory (Omigbodun et al., 2022; Turjanmaa et al., 2025). By revealing how readers embody historical wounds, negotiate cultural identities, and experience empathic resonance, this research highlights literature’s unique capacity to facilitate emotional and cognitive engagement with collective trauma. Culturally, these findings underscore the role of literature as a catalyst for dialogue about silenced historical narratives within Indonesian society, encouraging intergenerational conversations and broader social reflection. Practically, the study offers valuable insights for educators, cultural practitioners, and policymakers seeking to utilize literature as a tool for cultural remembrance and as a means of fostering empathy, reconciliation, and identity reconstruction in diverse contexts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the study provides meaningful insights, several limitations must be acknowledged to ensure a balanced interpretation of its findings (Pascual, 2021). First, the relatively small sample size of twelve participants limits the extent to which conclusions can be generalized beyond the specific cultural and literary context of this research. Second, the study’s focus on a single literary text, *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak, constrains the breadth of interpretive comparisons across different genres or representations of trauma narratives. Third, as the research relies on self-reported experiences, the interpretations may be influenced by participants’ retrospective perceptions, personal biases, or emotional states at the time of data collection. Lastly, while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides a robust framework for uncovering subjective meanings, its strength lies in depth rather than breadth, meaning that findings emphasize contextual richness rather than statistical generalizability. These limitations, however, do not diminish the study’s contributions but instead highlight opportunities for further exploration.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Building upon these findings, future research could explore several important directions. Comparative studies examining multiple literary texts or narratives from diverse cultural and historical contexts would provide deeper insights into how readers engage with collective trauma across settings. Expanding the sample size to include participants from varied age groups, social backgrounds, and geographic regions could also enhance the understanding of how cultural identity influences readers' meaning-making processes. Additionally, integrating cross-disciplinary approaches—for example, combining phenomenology with narrative psychology or memory studies—could further illuminate the interplay between literature, personal identity, and cultural belonging. Finally, longitudinal studies could investigate how readers' interpretations evolve over time, shedding light on the dynamic nature of meaning-making and the role literature plays in shaping collective remembrance. These future directions would not only deepen theoretical frameworks but also expand the practical applications of literature as a cultural mediator in societies grappling with complex historical legacies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how readers construct meaning from literary representations of collective trauma and cultural memory within *Amba* by Laksmi Pamuntjak, addressing the central question of how literature shapes personal and collective identities. The findings revealed that readers embody historical wounds, negotiate cultural identities, and experience empathic resonance, demonstrating that literature functions as a powerful medium for emotional engagement and identity reconstruction. By adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study captured the depth of participants' lived experiences and addressed limitations of previous research that relied heavily on textual analysis or quantitative approaches. Beyond restating the findings, this research makes a strong theoretical contribution by foregrounding readers' experiential engagement as a critical but often overlooked dimension in trauma and memory studies. It highlights the importance of shifting from a text-centered to a reader-centered framework, thereby enriching phenomenological approaches to literary analysis. Furthermore, the study underscores the broader cross-cultural applicability of its insights. Although grounded in the Indonesian context of *Amba*, the interpretive processes identified—embodied memory, negotiation of identity, empathic resonance, and literature as a catalyst for remembrance—offer transferable analytical categories for understanding how diverse readerships across cultural settings engage with traumatic histories. This positions literature not only as a national mediator of memory but also as a global conduit for fostering empathy, intercultural dialogue, and collective healing. The study offers theoretical and practical insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers seeking to use literature to deepen awareness of cultural memory and historical narratives. By extending the discussion to broader cultural contexts, it invites comparative work that can further illuminate universal as well as culturally specific patterns of meaning-making. Future research could extend these findings by exploring different literary texts, broader participant groups, or cross-cultural perspectives to enrich the understanding of meaning-making processes in diverse contexts.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All procedures, data collection, analysis, and interpretations were conducted independently and objectively. There were no financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes of this study.

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