



COLLECTIVE TRAUMA OF COLONIALISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN SHORT STORIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Although colonial rule in Southeast Asia has formally ended, sociocultural and psychological wounds persist. If left unaddressed, this trauma can hinder efforts toward regional cohesion, cultural resilience, and sustainable development. This study examines the representation of collective trauma caused by colonialism in Southeast Asian short stories. It draws on Kai Erikson's concept of collective trauma, postcolonial theory, and Claudio Guillén's theory of comparative literature. The method employed is systematic content analysis with context-based inference. The primary texts analyzed include: *Recuerdos de Patay* by Caroline S. Hau (Philippines), *Variola* by Iksaka Banu (Indonesia), *Victoria and Her Kimono* by M. Shanmughalingam (Malaysia), and *The Interview* by Gopal Baratham (Singapore). Data collection was carried out through close reading, note-taking, and analytical observation. The data were analyzed qualitatively using content analysis. The findings reveal various dimensions of postcolonial collective trauma portrayed in the stories, including social disintegration, psychological dislocation, the erosion of communal bonds, intergenerational transmission of trauma, collective identity as victims, and transformations of meaning systems. These findings suggest that literature serves not only as a witness to historical wounds but also as a cultural space for negotiating memory, identity, and healing. In the Southeast Asian context, social healing is essential in shaping regional identity through the understanding of literature and culture.

Keywords: *Collective trauma, postcolonial, Southeast Asian short stories, Kai Erikson*

INTRODUCTION

Short stories from Southeast Asia serve as a vital lens for examining the enduring legacies of colonialism, capturing the complex dynamics of power, resistance, and cultural negotiation. Literature in this region frequently explores themes such as migration and displacement, gender discrimination, and the negotiation of cultural identity through hybridity and preservation (Macasaet, 2015; Ranwarat Poonsri, 2022; Ertanto, 2022; Goings, 2023; Kameo, 2024; Aung-Thwin, 1973; Rosalia Suryani, 2024; Coloma, 2013). These narratives also depict power imbalances and resistance strategies, the transformation of colonial spaces, and the role of language in identity formation (Ertanto, 2022; Zhu, 2022; Coloma, 2013; Aung-Thwin, 1973; Rosalia Suryani, 2024; Simon, 2001; Bolton, 2000; Doran, 2003). Ultimately, these texts challenge dominant narratives, fostering critical reflection on postcolonial memory, trauma, and identity reconstruction in the Southeast Asian context (Kidder, 2020; Axel, 2001; Espiritu, 2020; Nordholt, 2011; Doran, 2003; Coloma, 2013).

In each nation, the literary response to colonialism is distinct yet interconnected. Philippine literature, shaped by Spanish and American rule, grapples with the search for an authentic "Filipinoness" amidst a legacy of conquest (Betsayda, 2021; Casanova, 2017; Diaz, 2015). Filipino writers often subvert colonial power structures by strategically adopting and re-appropriating English as a vehicle for nationalist expression and counter-

colonialism (Esguerra, 2021; Coloma, 2013; López-Calvo, 2019). Similarly, Indonesian literature serves as a critical mirror to the nation's struggle for self-determination, examining the systematic oppression of figures like the *nyai* (concubine) and highlighting resistance through education and journalism (Qolbi, 2025; Mukti, et al, 2023a; Rahmayati, 2021). Indonesian writers, such as Iksaka Banu, reclaim history and identity by exploring the complexities of reconciliation and hybridity (Sanjaya, 2023; Anantama & Widodo, 2021; Mukti & Budiyanto, 2023b). The impact on the natural environment is also a prominent theme, advocating for ecological decolonization through works like Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* (Darsono & Fahrudin, 2024; Qolbi, 2025).

Malaysia's literary scene, profoundly impacted by British rule, explores the racial hierarchies and multicultural dynamics left in its wake (Pakri, 2022; Pillai, 2016). Post-independence literature in English has evolved from portraying an "exotic" Malaysia to critiquing colonial power structures and exploring hybrid identities (Liu, 2023; Amran, 2020). Writers use powerful symbols, such as food, to represent both unity and conflict, while challenging racial narratives and patriarchal structures (Perry, 2017; Mattar, 2021; Show, 2021). Meanwhile, Singaporean literature, also shaped by British colonialism, serves as an arena for questioning and challenging colonial legacies (Anderson, 2012; Robert, 2021). The dominance of English has created complex layers of identity where local culture interacts with Western influences, leading writers to explore hybrid identities and decolonize thought (Ibrahim, 2014; Reddy & van Dam, 2020; Mukherjee & Quayson, 2023; Golding & Kopsick, 2019; Lake & Reynolds, 2017; Macaro et al., 2017).

Considering this rich literary landscape, this study aims to explore the shared experience of postcolonial collective trauma within a selection of Southeast Asian short stories. The selected texts are: *Recuerdos de Patay* by Caroline S. Hau (Philippines), *Variola* by Iksaka Banu (Indonesia), *Victoria and Her Kimono* by M. Shanmughalingam (Malaysia), and *The Interview* by Gopal Baratham (Singapore).

This research is grounded in three key theoretical frameworks. First, we adopt Kai Erikson's concept of collective trauma, which posits that traumatic events do not just harm individuals but also damage the social fabric and community bonds (Abrutyn, 2023). This framework distinguishes collective trauma from cultural trauma by focusing on the impacts on communal mental health and social infrastructure (Abrutyn, 2023; Hirschberger, 2018). This theory has been applied in various contexts, from Palestine to the Black American community, and is particularly relevant here for understanding how colonialism embeds shared pain into community identity (Nafees, 2025; Hanif, 2018; Michael, 2016; Hajra Umer, et al., 2025).

Second, the study uses postcolonial theory, drawing on the foundational ideas of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Fanon's work illuminates the psychological alienation of the colonized, while Said's critique of Orientalism exposes how Western discourse distorts reality (Avci, 2024; Al-Saidi, 2014). This theoretical lens is crucial for analyzing how colonialism, as a system of domination, forces colonized people to question their identities and erases indigenous cultures (Chobanyuk, 2025; Larbaoui, 2019). Postcolonial literature, therefore, becomes a tool for countering these narratives and reclaiming the past (Al-Saidi, 2014; Rahman, 2025).

Finally, this study apply Claudio Guillén's theory of comparative literature, which provides a systemic and transnational approach to literary study. Guillén emphasizes balancing the universal and the particular, transcending national literary histories to connect local specificities with broader human experiences (Franek, 2014; Villanueva,

2011; Ezpeleta, 2020). This framework allows us to examine the shared patterns of colonial trauma across different national literatures in a methodologically sound manner.

This research offers a novel comparative analysis of the collective trauma of colonialism within these Southeast Asian short stories. It seeks to demonstrate literature's function not merely as a historical record but as a crucial cultural space for negotiating memory, identity, and healing. Ultimately, understanding these literary expressions is vital for fostering social healing and shaping a unified regional identity in Southeast Asia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a comparative literature design to analyze the representation of postcolonial collective trauma. The primary data consist of four short stories from Southeast Asia: *Recuerdos de Patay* by Caroline S. Hau (Philippines), *Variola* by Iksaka Banu (Indonesia), *Victoria and Her Kimono* by M. Shanmughalingam (Malaysia), and *The Interview* by Gopal Baratham (Singapore).

Data were collected through close reading and analytical note-taking to identify narrative elements, symbols, and dialogues related to indicators of collective trauma (Abrutyn, 2023; Hirschberger, 2018). The analysis was conducted qualitatively using context-based content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019), focusing on themes, characters, and conflicts within the narratives.

The research is guided by a comparative framework based on Claudio Guillén's theory of comparative literature (Guillén, 1993) to identify similarities, differences, and unique patterns of trauma representation across the four texts. The theoretical foundations include Kai Erikson's concept of collective trauma (Erikson, 1976), which informs the analysis of social and communal bond breakdown, and postcolonial theory (Fanon, 2008; Said, 1978), which is used to dissect power, identity, and resistance dynamics. The findings from the textual analysis were then contextualized with the social and political history of each country to deepen the interpretation (Macasaet, 2015; Pakri, 2022). Theoretical triangulation, by applying multiple theoretical lenses, was used to minimize interpretation bias and ensure data validity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The four short stories selected for this study from the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia illuminate the complex relationship between memory, history, and identity within their respective turbulent historical contexts. "Recuerdos de Patay" (Hau, 2004) explores fragmented memory and incoherent history through a character's attempt to reconstruct a town's past. In contrast, "Variola" (Banu, 2019) highlights the clash between science and religious dogma during a smallpox epidemic in the Dutch East Indies. From Singapore, "The Interview" (Baratham, 2014) depicts a generational and cultural clash between a young interviewer and a British veteran, revealing a philosophical perspective on suffering that challenges a superficial understanding. Finally, the Malaysian short story "Victoria and Her Kimono" (Shanmughalingam, 2018) portrays a couple's contrasting survival strategies during the Japanese occupation, demonstrating that adaptability is more crucial for survival than rigid principles.

When examined through the lens of Kai Erikson's concept of collective trauma, these narratives collectively reveal six key aspects of postcolonial trauma, as summarized in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Comparison of Collective Trauma Based on Kai Erikson's Theory in Southeast Asian Short Stories

Concept	Indicators	<i>Variola</i> (Indonesia)	<i>Recuerdos de Patay</i> (Philippines)	<i>The Interview</i> (Singapore)	<i>Victoria and Her Kimono</i> (Malaysia)
Damage to the Social Fabric	- Narratives of betrayal - Internal conflict - Decline in social participation	Conflict between health and religious authorities over vaccination.	The ostracization of Celestina and rumors about Milagros's father.	Generational conflict between the father (war generation) and the son (modern generation).	Collapse of trust in British colonial authority.
Breakdown of Social Infrastructure	- Ineffective institutions - Disruption of the education system - Closure of economic institutions	The colonial government was slow; its bureaucracy hindered outbreak response.	Cattle plague and war led to the loss of landowners.	Collapse of British colonial authority during the Japanese occupation.	Schools were repurposed for military use; local languages were banned.
Wounded Collective Identity	- Internalized stigma - Loss of identity pride - Portrayal as victims	Racial and religious stigma concerning blood "purity."	The community is portrayed as victims of perpetual suffering.	The older generation perceives its identity as wounded by the defeat in war.	Internalization of the stigma of being a "weak" society under colonial rule.
Formation of Traumatic Memory	- Perpetually retold stories - Cultural products that perpetuate trauma - Symbols of trauma	Historical narratives of smallpox victims as a perennial threat.	The practice of painting the dead (<i>recuerdo de patay</i>).	Conversations about the prisoner-of-war experience.	The experience of Japanese brutality became a collective story.
Shared Sense of Loss	- Collective acknowledgment of loss - Use of "we" in suffering - Minimization of individual experience	Both European and native parents lost children.	Collective awareness of suffering caused by war and plague.	Reflection on the shared suffering of prisoners of war.	Hunger and economic deprivation were experienced collectively by the community.
Crisis of Meaning and Legitimacy	- Loss of trust in authority - Rhetorical "why" questions - Search for new meaning	Conflict of meaning between science and God's will.	Search for meaning through art and traditional beliefs.	Criticism of the "heroic" war narrative.	Crisis of authority following the collapse of colonial rule.

Source: Operational concepts and definitions are adapted from Erikson (1976; 1995; 2023), Hirschberger (2018), Michael (2016), Hanif (2018), Abrutyn (2023), Hajra Umer et al. (2025), and Nafees (2025). The short stories are sourced from Banu (2019), Hau (2004), Baratham (2014), and Shanmughalingam (2018).

The analysis of these four short stories identifies six key aspects of collective trauma: (1) the breakdown of social bonds, (2) the collapse of social infrastructure, (3) a wounded sense of collective self, (4) the formation of a traumatic collective memory, (5) a shared sense of loss, and (6) a crisis of meaning and legitimacy.

The four stories consistently demonstrate how colonialism damaged the social fabric of Southeast Asian communities, leading to the breakdown of social bonds. In "Variola," the conflict between the colonial health authorities and the priest Van

Kijkscherp clearly reflects social fragmentation. This dispute shows how an external crisis, in this case, a plague, deepens existing social divisions.

"Kami keberatan karena Tuan akan memasukkan bibit penyakit ke dalam tubuh anak-anak itu... Sadarkah, bahwa di sini Tuan sebenarnya sedang berusaha mencampuri urusan Tuhan?" (Banu, 2019).

["We object, Sir, for you intend to introduce the very seeds of malady into the bodies of those children... Are you aware that in this endeavor, you are in truth attempting to interfere in the affairs of God Himself?" (Banu, 2019)]

The first two aspects, the breakdown of social bonds and the collapse of social infrastructure, are prominently featured. In "Variola," the dialogue between colonial health authorities and the priest Van Kijkscherp exemplifies how plague and differing ideologies deepen existing social divisions and fragment communities. Similarly, "Victoria and Her Kimono" illustrates the breakdown of social trust following the collapse of British colonial authority, as reflected in the line, "The British have retreated. One day the Japanese will also have to retreat" (Shanmughalingam, 2018). This loss of faith in external authorities leads to the breakdown of communal bonds. This social fragmentation is further compounded by the collapse of social institutions. "Recuerdos de Patay" portrays this through the breakdown of economic and social systems, where a "cattle plague wiped out almost all of Don Leon's buffalo..." (Hau, 2004), signifying a shift from stability to chaos. In "The Interview," this institutional collapse is viewed through a generational lens, where the "entire context of the story is the collapse of British colonial authority in Singapore during WWII" (Baratham, 2014), highlighting different generational experiences of the same event.

The third aspect, a wounded sense of collective self, is evident across the stories despite varying generational experiences. In "Victoria and Her Kimono," the colonized community internalizes the colonial stigma of being "weak," with "Col. Watanabe Wataru" demanding that "Malayans... be taught seishin and be trained to endure hardship to get rid of this" (Shanmughalingam, 2018). This forced reconfiguration of identity under colonial pressure reflects a deep psychological wounding. This trauma then contributes to the formation of a traumatic collective memory. Each story employs a distinct strategy to immortalize this trauma. "Recuerdos de Patay" uses painting as a cultural practice for memory processing (Hau, 2004), while "Variola" employs a medical narrative to perpetuate the memory of the smallpox plague (Banu, 2019).

The pressures of colonialism also foster a shared sense of loss, which, paradoxically, can lead to a form of unity. In "The Interview," Mason's statement that "hunger becomes not just an unpleasant sensation but almost a companion" (Baratham, 2014) demonstrates how shared suffering creates a collective bond. However, this communal experience culminates in a profound crisis of meaning and legitimacy. In "Variola," the conflict between science and religion, highlighted by the question "Thousands of people died in Bali. Does God want to take more lives?" (Banu, 2019), reflects the deep crisis of meaning that arises from collective trauma.

Beyond these shared themes, the individual authors provide specific insights into their respective contexts. Hau's (2004) work, for instance, engages with the themes of displacement and diaspora, which are central to Filipino-American literature shaped by US-Philippine neocolonial relations (Cabusao, 2019). Her focus on the Chinese diaspora challenges traditional national narratives and emphasizes transnationalism, advocating for a nuanced understanding of Filipino identity as a process of becoming (Cabusao, 2019; Chu, 2013). Similarly, Shanmughalingam's writings serve as a critical case study of postcolonial Malaysia, directly addressing issues of race, ethnicity, and class (Abdillah,

2023) and providing a crucial space for reexamining the colonial past's influence on contemporary Malaysian society.

Gopal Baratham's works, meanwhile, explore themes of identity, power, and alienation in a postcolonial context, using irony, satire, and allegory to critique the colonial system's psychological and social impacts (Ibrahim, 2014; Robert, 2021; Mukherjee & Quayson, 2023). His work, along with that of other Singaporean writers like Edwin Thumboo, contributes to the decolonization discourse by challenging colonial narratives and building independent cultural identities (Ibrahim, 2014; Thumboo, 2020; Mukherjee & Quayson, 2023; Robert, 2021).

Ultimately, the findings of this study extend Erikson's theory by showing that colonial trauma not only damages social infrastructure but also creates complex "hybrid identities" (Bhabha, 1994) that are constantly negotiated. The study supports the view of literature as a "space of contestation" (Said, 1978) where collective memory is reconstructed in resistance to colonial discourse. Through Guillén's comparative literary theory (Franek, 2014), the analysis underscores that despite each country's unique colonial experience, the patterns of collective trauma show significant similarities across Southeast Asia. This highlights the universal impact of colonialism and the critical role of literature in a shared process of healing.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how four short stories from Southeast Asia provide crucial insights into the enduring impact of colonial trauma on regional identity and memory. Drawing on Kai Erikson's theory, this study found that despite each country's unique historical experience, they share common patterns of collective trauma, including the breakdown of social bonds, the collapse of infrastructure, a wounded collective identity, the formation of traumatic memories, solidarity in suffering, and a crisis of meaning.

These findings not only enrich our understanding of Southeast Asian literature but also offer important contributions to both trauma theory and postcolonial studies. As Erikson (1995) argued, collective trauma isn't the end of a community but the starting point for reconstruction and transformation. The short stories analyzed here show how Southeast Asian communities continue to navigate the complex legacy of colonial trauma in their ongoing quest for new meaning and authentic identity.

This study has some limitations. Its focus on four countries may not fully capture the diversity of colonial experiences across Southeast Asia. Additionally, the reliance on translated texts may not fully convey the original linguistic nuances. Future research could expand the scope to other countries, use digital humanities to analyze a larger corpus of texts, or delve into the gender and class dimensions of colonial trauma to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

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