

Spectral Memory and Inherited Trauma in “Evening Is the Whole Day”

Memori Spektral dan Trauma Warisan dalam Novel “Evening is the Whole Day”

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the symbolic representation of trauma through spectral imagery in Preeta Samarasan’s novel “Evening is the Whole Day”, focusing on the character Aasha and her ability to see ghosts. Grounded in Michelle Balaev’s Pluralistic Trauma Theory, which emphasizes trauma’s cultural, environmental, and narrative dimensions, the research examines how Aasha’s visions function as literary manifestations of inherited trauma shaped by familial and sociopolitical tensions following Malaysia’s 13th May 1969 Incident. Although Aasha did not witness the violence firsthand, her trauma emerges through supernatural perception, silence, and emotional fragmentation. Using qualitative literary analysis supported by a taxonomy table and mind map, the study identifies metaphor, nonlinear narrative, and symbolism as key techniques portraying Aasha’s psychological disorientation. These elements illustrate how historical violence intrudes upon present consciousness, particularly in those born after the events. This research contributes to trauma studies by addressing a gap in Malaysian literary criticism and underscores fiction’s ability to re-memorialize silenced histories. Ultimately, the study highlights how literature can deepen empathy and offer insight into the enduring emotional legacy of collective trauma.

Keywords: *Spectral Imagery, 13th May Incident, Pluralistic Trauma Theory, Malaysian Literature, Symbolism*

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka representasi simbolik trauma melalui gambaran spektrum dalam novel “Evening is the Whole Day” karya Preeta Samarasan, dengan tumpuan khusus kepada watak Aasha dan keupayaannya melihat hantu. Berteraskan Teori Trauma Pluralistik oleh Michelle Balaev, yang menekankan dimensi budaya, persekitaran, dan naratif dalam trauma, kajian ini menganalisis bagaimana penglihatan Aasha berfungsi sebagai manifestasi sastera terhadap trauma warisan yang dibentuk oleh ketegangan keluarga dan sosiopolitik selepas Peristiwa 13 Mei 1969 di Malaysia. Walaupun Aasha tidak menyaksikan keganasan secara langsung,

traumanya muncul melalui persepsi ghaib, kesunyian, dan pemecahan emosi. Dengan menggunakan analisis sastra kualitatif yang disokong oleh jadual taksonomi dan peta minda, kajian ini mengenal pasti metafora, naratif tidak linear, dan simbolisme sebagai teknik utama dalam menggambarkan kekacauan psikologi Aasha. Unsur-unsur ini menggambarkan bagaimana keganasan sejarah terus menyusup ke dalam kesedaran masa kini, terutamanya dalam kalangan generasi selepas peristiwa tersebut. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada bidang kajian trauma dengan menangani kekosongan dalam kritikan sastra Malaysia, dan menegaskan keupayaan fiksi untuk mengingatkan semula sejarah yang dibisukan. Akhirnya, kajian ini menyerlahkan bagaimana sastra dapat memperdalam empati dan menawarkan pemahaman terhadap warisan emosi yang berpanjangan akibat trauma kolektif.

Kata Kunci: *Imajinasi Spektrum, Peristiwa 13 Mei, Teori Trauma Pluralistik, Sastra Malaysia, Simbolisme*

1 Introduction

Trauma is “a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self’s emotional organization and perception of the external world,” with effects that linger in memory, the unconscious, and self-perception (Balaev, 2018, p. 360). Literature provides a vital space to process such trauma, offering a medium through which it can be articulated and reconstructed. Analysing techniques like metaphor, narrative structure, and spectral imagery is crucial in understanding how trauma is conveyed in fiction. The 13th May Incident of 1969 remains a scar on Malaysia’s history a sombre episode characterised by the inter-ethnic violence and political upheaval that continues to shape the nation. This study examines how the trauma of the 13th May 1969 Incident, a pivotal and painful moment in Malaysia’s history, is portrayed in Preeta Samarasan’s “Evening is the Whole Day”. Drawing from contemporary trauma studies, particularly Balaev’s pluralistic trauma theory, the research explores the interplay of memory, trauma, and spectral imagery in the novel. Trauma studies, first rooted in Freudian theory, define trauma as an experience that exceeds language, making it difficult to express directly (Balaev, 2018, p. 363). However, literature allows such inexpressible experiences to be symbolically represented. As Caruth (1996, cited in Balaev, 2018, p. 364) notes, “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own.” The study, therefore, considers how Aasha’s ability to see ghosts becomes a symbol of trauma, illustrating how the past continues to intrude on the present.

While trauma is often viewed as a cognitive disruption that resists direct expression (Caruth, 1969, p. 4), literature offers a way to externalize and explore it. The central concern of this study is that there remains a gap in how the trauma of the 13th May Incident in Malaysian literary studies is represented and analysed, especially through unconventional forms like spectral imagery. This research investigates how Aasha’s ghost-seeing in the novel reflects psychological and emotional consequences of inherited trauma. Rather than seeking truth, this study explores how trauma is negotiated and represented years after the event. By focusing on Aasha’s spectral visions, the research highlights how literary techniques serve to humanize historical violence, portraying trauma from a survivor’s intimate and emotional perspective.

This study, grounded in trauma studies, examines Preeta Samarasan’s “Evening is the Whole Day” to explore how Aasha’s ability to see ghosts serves as a literary representation of trauma. Focusing on metaphors, narrative structure, and spectral imagery, the analysis investigates how trauma is portrayed through Aasha’s character in response to the lingering effects of the 13th May Incident. Although the event is not explicitly depicted, the novel reflects its psychological and social aftermath. Using Michelle Balaev’s Pluralistic Trauma Theory which emphasizes cultural, environmental, and narrative dimensions of trauma, this research considers how trauma is conveyed through fragmented narratives and symbolic imagery. The study centers on Aasha’s supernatural experiences to explore how trauma is externalized in a postcolonial Malaysian context.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how trauma is depicted in Malaysian literature, particularly through spectral imagery. By focusing on Aasha's ghost-seeing in the novel, it offers insight into how fiction processes and preserves memories of historical violence like the 13th May Incident. The analysis highlights the role of literary techniques in conveying unspoken or culturally silenced trauma. In doing so, this research expands trauma studies into a Southeast Asian context, offering a focused case study that challenges Western-centric trauma frameworks and emphasizes literature's power to humanize and interpret collective memory.

1.1 Research Aim

The study explores how spectral imagery in Preeta Samarasan's "Evening Is the Whole Day" represents inherited trauma from the 13th May Incident through Aasha's ability to see ghosts.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To identify the literary techniques used to depict Aasha's trauma in the novel in relation to the 13th May Incident.
2. To examine how Aasha's ability to see ghosts symbolizes her trauma in relation to the novel's broader engagement with the 13th May Incident.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What literary techniques are used to depict Aasha's trauma in relation to the 13th May Incident in the novel?
2. How does Aasha's ability to see ghosts symbolize her trauma from the 13th May Incident?

2 Literature Review

The primary aim of this literature review is to navigate the dimensions of trauma studies and examine how the 13th May Incident is represented in literature. It explores collective trauma and how authors reconstruct memory through literary techniques, especially spectral imagery.

Michelle Balaev's (2018) *Pluralistic Trauma Theory* challenges traditional models like Cathy Caruth's by arguing that trauma is not inherently unspeakable but shaped by cultural, historical, and environmental forces. Trauma, according to Balaev (2014, 2018), is dynamic and its representation varies across contexts. Her theory highlights how literature can reconstruct trauma through memory, symbols, and collective history. This is especially relevant when analysing trauma within the Malaysian context of the 13th May Incident—where the setting, silence, and emotional residue in characters like Aasha show how trauma can be inherited and culturally embedded. Balaev's focus on environment and identity aligns with this study's aim to examine trauma not as a singular psychological event but as an experience shaped by social and familial structures. Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography* (2023) adds to this discussion by exploring how fiction can express trauma more effectively than traditional testimonial forms. Fiction, she argues, allows for deeper engagement with emotional truth. This reinforces the choice of analysing a novel, rather than historical records, to access the psychological consequences of the 13th May Incident.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, as cited in Show (2021), explains how trauma is transmitted to generations who did not directly experience it. In *Narrating the Racial Riots of 13 May 1969*, Ying Xin Show explores how literature becomes a space for engaging with these inherited memories. Her study reveals that authors often avoid closure, instead offering unresolved narratives

that reflect the nature of historical trauma. Ann Ang’s article *Transnational Re-memorialization in Preeta Samarasan’s Evening is the Whole Day* (2021) examines how literary works reconstruct silenced histories. Ang emphasizes how fragmented narrative and cultural symbols in Samarasan’s work create spaces for marginalized voices. Both Show and Ang support this study’s aim to investigate how fiction processes collective trauma, especially in the absence of formal discourse.

Chia-Sui Lee (2016) introduces the concept of spectral space which she defines as locations infused with the lingering presence of trauma, where past and present collapse. While her focus is on space, the disruption of temporality aligns with this study’s focus on spectral imagery. Yuri Corrigan (2018) explores the notion of the “external soul” in trauma fiction, where trauma becomes something external to the self that must be reclaimed. This symbolic reading of trauma complements the analysis of Aasha’s ghosts as manifestations of emotional dislocation. Joshua M. Leone (2018) examines war comics as a form of trauma narrative, highlighting how trauma affects the body and behaviour. His emphasis on psychosomatic responses enriches this study’s approach, particularly in understanding how Aasha’s visions and silences reflect internalized trauma.

This literature review establishes a foundation for analysing trauma in “*Evening is the Whole Day*”. Balaev’s pluralistic trauma theory emphasizes how trauma is shaped by cultural context, memory, and environment. Show and Ang support the role of literature in preserving silenced histories and representing postmemory. Lee, Corrigan, and Leone, though from broader contexts, offer insights into how haunting, identity, and embodiment inform trauma’s portrayal in fiction. In conclusion, these works justify this study’s focus on spectral imagery as a symbolic and narrative tool for expressing inherited trauma. This review provides the necessary framework to explore how Aasha’s ghost-seeing articulates Malaysia’s unresolved historical trauma.

3 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, specifically using critical literary analysis to explore the portrayal of trauma related to the 13th May Incident in Preeta Samarasan’s novel “*Evening is the Whole Day*”. The qualitative approach is well-suited for in-depth textual analysis and the interpretation of complex themes, emotions, and narrative techniques.

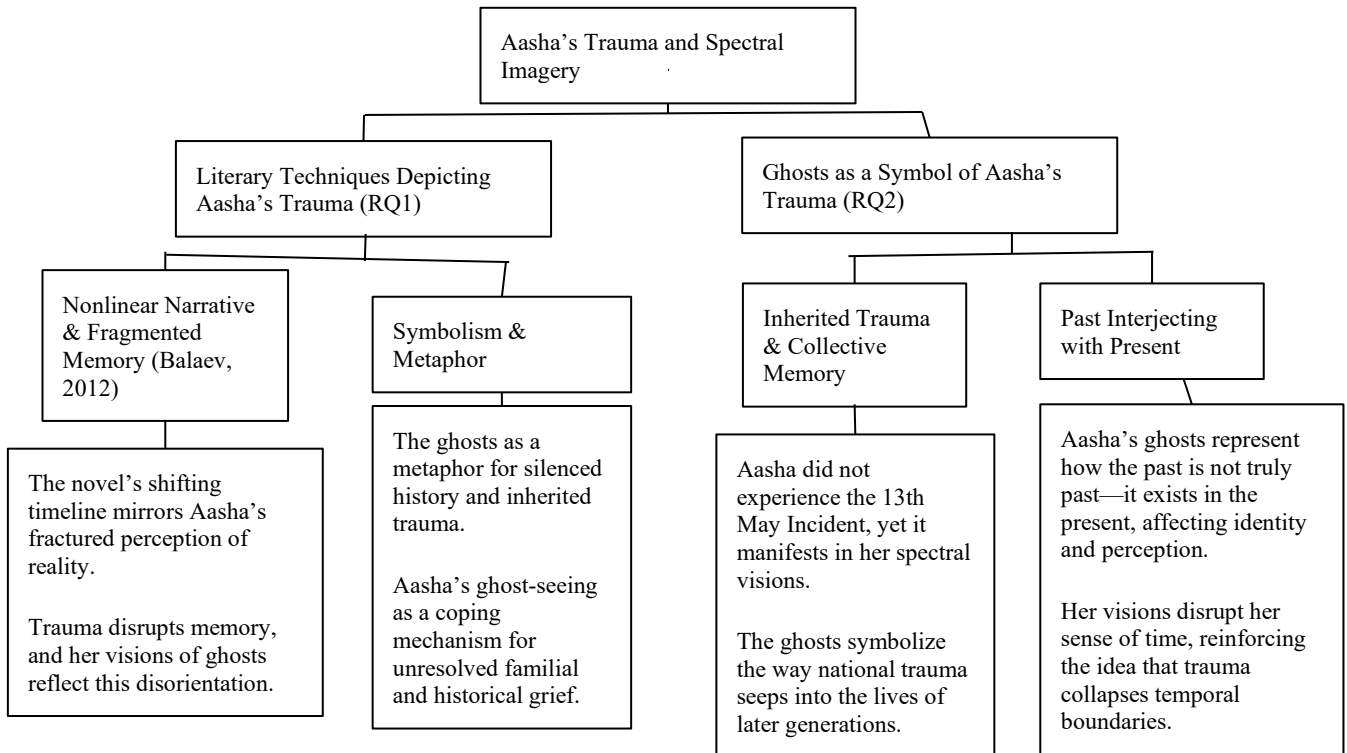
3.1 Taxonomy

TABLE 3.1 Table of Taxonomy

Concept	Definition	Example from Novel
Environmental, Social, and Political Influence on Trauma	Trauma is not merely an internal psychological wound but is shaped by external forces such as culture, history, and environment (Balaev, 2014, p. 7).	Although Aasha did not directly experience the 13th May Incident, its lingering impact seeps into her life through the unspoken anxieties and tensions in her family and society, demonstrating how trauma is transmitted through social and environmental factors rather than just firsthand experience.
Narrative Structure and Memory	Trauma affects memory and storytelling, leading to nonlinear narratives and fragmented recollections (Balaev, 2012, p. 6).	Aasha’s ghosts embody the intrusion of memory into her present reality, symbolizing how trauma resists linear storytelling and instead manifests in spectral, disjointed recollections.
Multiplicity of Traumatic Responses	Trauma manifests in diverse ways, not just through PTSD but also through emotions like guilt, silence, and dissociation (Balaev, 2018, p. 368).	Aasha’s response to trauma is through her visions of ghosts, a reaction unique to her as no other member of her household experienced this.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

FIGURE 3.1 Theoretical Framework Mind Map



The taxonomy table serves as a conceptual framework that categorizes key theoretical perspectives relevant to the study. Each category provides a lens through which the novel’s literary techniques are examined. This structured approach prevents an overly broad or unfocused interpretation of spectral imagery and trauma. The mind map is a visual tool that organizes the relationship between Aasha’s trauma, spectral imagery, and the novel’s literary techniques. It aids in systematically addressing the research questions by mapping out:

1. The literary techniques used to depict Aasha’s trauma, such as fragmented narrative, metaphor, and symbolism.
2. How Aasha’s ability to see ghosts functions as a symbol of trauma, connecting her spectral visions to the broader themes of inherited trauma, disrupted temporality, and the interplay between past and present.

By integrating these tools, the study ensures a methodical and theory-driven approach to analysing trauma in “Evening is the Whole Day”. The taxonomy table structures the theoretical foundation, while the mind map organizes the practical application of these theories within the novel’s narrative.

4 Findings and Discussion

This chapter analyses Aasha’s trauma in “Evening is the Whole Day” through the lens of Balaev’s Pluralistic Trauma Theory. It is organized into three sections: firstly, Aasha’s inherited trauma through familial silence and sociopolitical tensions after the 13th May Incident; secondly, the use of literary

techniques, fragmented narrative, metaphor, and symbolism, to answer the first research question; and thirdly, the symbolic role of spectral imagery in representing trauma, to answer the second research question.

The findings establish that Aasha's trauma is shaped by the 13th May Incident, despite her lack of direct experience with the violence. Inherited through familial silence and unresolved tensions, her character underscores that trauma does not require first hand exposure. This aligns with Balaev's Pluralistic Trauma Theory, which highlights the role of external sociopolitical factors in shaping and transmitting trauma across generations. The novel illustrates this through the family's pervasive silence, which manifests physically as a haunting presence around Aasha, as seen in Amma's distant gaze, Appa's brooding quiet, and Paati's ghostly, noiseless movements. Here, silence symbolizes repressed memories linked to the 13th May Incident. Aasha's ability to see ghosts further embodies this inherited trauma. Her vision of spirits "united by their unhealthy fascination with tragedy" (Samarasan, 2009, p. 36) reflects how suppressed histories interject into her reality, despite her indirect connection to the event. Through Aasha's perspective, Samarasan reveals trauma as deeply rooted in environmental, social, and political forces. Spectral imagery and familial silence work together to portray the complexity of intergenerational trauma.

4.1 Literary Techniques Used to Depict Aasha's Trauma

This section explores the literary techniques Samarasan uses to depict Aasha's trauma: fragmented narrative, metaphor, and symbolism. Grounded in Balaev's Pluralistic Trauma Theory, the analysis shows how these techniques reflect Aasha's psychological and emotional responses to the sociopolitical aftermath of the 13th May Incident. More than stylistic choices, they serve as narrative strategies to convey the persistence, complexity, and indirect transmission of trauma. By isolating these devices, the study reveals how Aasha's supernatural experiences embody both inherited and collective trauma.

Firstly, the novel's fragmented narrative mirrors the disorienting effects of trauma on Aasha's memory and perception. In line with Balaev's (2012, p. 6) claim that trauma disrupts storytelling and causes nonlinear recollections, the novel frequently shifts between past and present without clear transitions, reflecting Aasha's blurred boundary between memory and reality. A key example appears during her ghost encounters in the backyard (42), where abrupt temporal shifts illustrate how trauma destabilizes her sense of time. These sudden appearances of ghosts disrupt narrative flow and blend past trauma into her present, symbolizing the unresolved impact of the 13th May Incident. This nonlinearity represents Aasha's psychological fragmentation and suggests her trauma is not confined to memory but remains a continuous, invasive force. Through these disruptions, Samarasan emphasizes that trauma resists coherent narration and continuously shapes identity and experience.

While fragmentation distorts Aasha's sense of time and memory, metaphor and symbolism provide ways to represent what trauma resists saying directly. Metaphors function as a key literary device to express the intangible nature of trauma, resonating with Balaev's (2014, p. 22) claim that trauma often requires indirect, symbolic representation. A central metaphor is spectral imagery, specifically Aasha's perception of ghosts, and the ghosts themselves are described as "unfinishable business and lingering discontent" (42), encapsulating trauma as unresolved and ongoing. The ghosts metaphorically embody the trauma of the 13th May Incident, representing both the unresolved issues of her family and broader Malaysian society. Symbolism further articulates the submerged emotional landscape Aasha navigates. Each ghost she encounters represents a distinct facet of trauma: Paati's ghost reflects intergenerational silence, the backyard spirits evoke collective national grief, Uncle Ballroom's "living ghost" status suggests familial shame, Mr. McDougall's daughter represents colonial erasure and emotional isolation, and Chellam's fading presence symbolizes class-based marginalization and silencing. These

ghosts are not only narrative devices but carriers of memory, social critique, and psychological truth. Paati's ghost symbolizes intergenerational trauma and emotional neglect. Aasha sees her as "peckish, transparent Paati" eating "the coveted grain" that "shoots down her gossamer throat" (90), a metaphor for unmet needs. Aasha's statement, "Now that you're a ghost, I can make sure that no one is ever mean to you again" (90), reveals inherited guilt and emotional burden. Her gradual fading, as seen from the quote, "each day since she died she'd been missing another small part of herself", mirrors the uneven persistence of traumatic memory. Paati appears in everyday scenes, "helping herself to a Marie biscuit crumb" or curling her "transparent ghost feet... on the cool marble" (7), suggesting trauma pervades the mundane. She later reclaims authority, sitting "regal and disdainful as a queen" (33), asserting matriarchal presence even in death. Her final appearance, "just outside the gate... not waving, not angry, not crying" (340), presents trauma as a silent, constant witness. Through Paati, Samarasan shows trauma as a lingering, emotionally central force passed through generations.

Next, the ghosts Aasha sees in the backyard represent collective, national trauma. Described as arriving "united by their unhealthy fascination with tragedy, with unfinishable business and lingering discontent" (36), they embody suppressed grief and unresolved history. Compared to crows, they signal decay and death, settling in everyday spaces like "tree branches" and "flowerpots." Though passive, their presence unsettles Aasha, foreshadowing catastrophe: "they would not be here if some ghastly spectacle were not about to unfold." Aasha walks "past the teeming ghosts" to collect tamarind pods "as if they were insurance against future catastrophe" (37), showing trauma's impact on behavior. Their presence during Paati's symbolic cremation, drifting off "like mourners after a small child's funeral" (39), reinforces their role as carriers of collective grief. These ghosts are symbols of inherited unrest that permeate Aasha's reality.

On the other hand, Uncle Ballroom is a living human that is treated as a ghost by the narrative through Aasha's perspective, a symbol embodying familial shame and emotional exile. Aasha watches him with "a quiet vigilance, a silvery subterranean river of distrust" (233), echoing her response to literal ghosts. His disappearance is ghostlike: "the bed was impeccably made," "the windows flung wide open," and Chellam announces, "Maddam, Master Ballroom gone" (253), mirroring a death notice. His absence, never fully addressed, mirrors trauma left unspoken. As a living ghost, he reflects the unacknowledged tensions that haunt the family's emotional landscape. Then, Mr. McDougall's daughter is Aasha's first and closest spectral companion, symbolizing emotional alienation and forgotten colonial trauma. Described as "the Big House's original ghost... who has stuck by Aasha through all her losses and longings" (7), she becomes a projection of Aasha's own isolation. The ghost "needs Aasha. To repeat her story to. To see herself in. To be fed crusts and crumbs by" (216), echoing trauma's demand for recognition. Aasha relates, "It's only fair that Aasha... be on the receiving end of need in this other world" (177). The ghost's origin as a child drowned by a discarded mistress embodies erased colonial histories. Her desire to be seen and remembered aligns with Hirsch's postmemory: Aasha inherits a story she didn't live but emotionally carries. Her line, "When [she] couldn't see the sunlight and the birds... that's when [she] was dead" (16), conveys the emotional death of trauma. This ghost, deeply human, allows Aasha to process grief and abandonment when words fail.

Chellam's ghost represents class-based erasure. Much like Uncle Ballroom, she is spectral even while alive, described as "a barely inhabited, steadily shrinking body, one foot already in the world of ghosts" (175). Her dehumanization begins before death, reflecting systemic silencing. Aasha sees her future ghost "screaming from a funeral pyre... with whole bitter planets orbiting at the back of her gaping mouth" (9), which is a vision of future guilt and unresolved injustice. In another moment, Aasha watches Chellam and Uma "flutter, mothlike, up the wall" (327), from which she is excluded, underscoring her emotional alienation. Chellam's ghost critiques domestic hierarchies and social inequality, embodying the trauma of silenced labor and sexual exploitation. Her presence shows how

trauma is relational and how the silencing of one woman haunts another.

4.2 *Spectral Imagery as Representations of Aasha's Trauma*

The spectral representations in Aasha's life illustrate how trauma operates through layers of silence, inheritance, and historical memory.

These spectral encounters function as active symbols of trauma's psychological and temporal disruption. Aasha's ability to see ghosts symbolizes trauma by illustrating how unresolved historical and familial wounds continuously infiltrate her present. This spectral imagery reflects the complex dynamics of inherited trauma, disrupted temporality, and the interplay between past and present, aligning with Balaev's pluralistic view of trauma as shaped by historical, cultural, and environmental contexts. Aasha's visions primarily represent inherited trauma. The ghosts embody unresolved familial and societal tensions rooted in the 13th May Incident and its racial and class aftermath. Paati's ghost, interacting with everyday objects, symbolizes the transmission of emotional neglect across generations. Chellam's ghost represents systemic discrimination embedded in domestic hierarchies, reinforcing that trauma shapes those not directly affected by the initial event.

Spectral imagery also reflects disrupted temporality. Aasha's ghost sightings blur past and present, distorting linear time and memory. The sudden, seamless appearances of ghosts into her daily life mirror Derrida's (as cited in Lee, 2016) idea of the specter as existing across temporalities. This illustrates how trauma resists resolution, manifesting instead as an ongoing presence that collapses historical distance. Each ghost embodies a distinct aspect of unresolved trauma. Uncle Ballroom's spectrality reflects buried familial shame, while Mr. McDougall's daughter symbolizes personal sorrow tied to erased colonial histories. These figures show how the past continually reshapes the present, influencing perception, identity, and emotion.

In conclusion, Aasha's spectral visions powerfully symbolize trauma's persistence. Through them, Samarasan portrays trauma as a haunting force, a phenomenon that is deeply inherited, temporally disruptive, and ever-present in the emotional fabric of the individual.

5 Conclusion and Implications

This study finds that Aasha's trauma in "Evening is the Whole Day" is not the result of direct exposure to the 13th May Incident but is inherited through familial silence and the lingering sociopolitical aftermath. Aasha's trauma is conveyed through fragmented narrative, metaphor, and symbolism. These literary strategies align with Michelle Balaev's Pluralistic Trauma Theory, which emphasizes trauma's cultural, historical, and environmental dimensions. Fragmented chronology reflects Aasha's disrupted sense of time, while the recurring spectral imagery serves as symbolic projections of intergenerational grief, injustice, and repressed memory. Her responses to trauma are varied, from silence and fear to vivid hallucinations, reinforcing trauma's complex, multifaceted nature.

Regarding the implications of the findings, the study affirms the novel's use of spectral imagery as a culturally resonant tool for representing inherited trauma in a Malaysian context. Aasha's ghosts illustrate how trauma can persist through silence, memory, and symbolism, offering a way to represent what cannot be easily voiced or historically acknowledged. Second, it demonstrates how literary techniques like fragmentation and metaphor perform trauma narratively, allowing fiction to encode psychological and emotional truth beyond factual record. By drawing on Balaev's pluralistic model, the study underscores how trauma is socially produced, narratively disruptive, and psychologically diverse. It highlights literature's role as a medium for re-memorializing silenced histories, especially in postcolonial societies where trauma remains culturally and politically suppressed.

This study contributes to Southeast Asian trauma literature by foregrounding a local narrative

within a global framework, extending trauma studies beyond its Western-dominated frameworks. It emphasizes fiction's potential to humanize historical violence, foster empathy, and challenge dominant historical discourses. Future research could examine trauma across other Malaysian or Southeast Asian texts, particularly those employing supernatural motifs. Comparative, feminist, or psychoanalytic readings, or reader-response studies exploring local engagement with such narratives, could further enrich understanding.

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