Representing Trauma in Post-9/11 American Fiction: A Case Study

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Abstract
This paper examines the representation of trauma in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer. This novel delineates a burgeoning concern about the psychological effects of trauma on its characters. The current paper is divided into three parts. The first part will discuss trauma transfer and the strategy of alluding to other calamities to contextualize the trauma of 9/11 and put it within the frame of global trauma. The second part will explore the failure of language and the use of visual elements to represent trauma, as trauma survivors do not find accurate words that can faithfully describe their horrible sufferings. The last part will shed light on trauma and recovery. The argument is that some trauma survivors find it very difficult to overcome and forget about those harsh and shocking moments in their lives while other victims manage to cope with trauma and endure their painful past.

Keywords: 9/11 attacks, trauma, transfer, the failure of language, recovery.
0. Introduction

Trauma studies emerged in the 1990s, when researchers used Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma that depicts a traumatic event that challenges the boundaries of language and even ruptures meaning. This trauma paradigm implies that pain is unrepresentable. The idea that a traumatic event breaks the mind, fractures the psyche, and even shatters meaning totally establishes the field's basic boundaries, and it continues to influence critical discourse even when alternative methodologies refute it. The psychological concepts that guide the field are defined by Freud's views on traumatic experience and memory. Joseph Breuer, Pierre Janet, Jean Martin Charcot, Hermann Oppenheim, Abram Kardiner, and Morton Prince, among others, developed psychoanalytic theories about the origins and effects of trauma throughout the nineteenth century study of shock and hysteria. Today, literary trauma critics use Freud's early theories in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) to conceptualize trauma.

Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman make remarkable researches about the concept of trauma and its function in literature and society. The concept of trauma as an unrepresentable event was promoted during this first wave of criticism. The idea of trauma's unrepresentability remains a central theme in the wave of research that emerge over the next two decades. In criticism, that commonly investigates the relationship between individual and societal traumatic experience, J. Brooks Bouson, Suzette Henke, Deborah Horvitz, Michael Rothberg, and Laurie Vickroy all use the traditional Freudian Caruthian concept of trauma and its delayed consequences. Trauma is receiving more attention in academic discourses, which is strongly linked to its expanding visibility in mainstream discourses. Trauma and memory have been identified as important cultural concepts. Trauma, according to Roger Luckhurst (2008), is an “exemplary conceptual knot” in modern networks of knowledge (p.14). Anne Whitehead (2004) identifies pervasive "cultural obsessions" with both individual and societal memory, leading to a "memory boom" (pp. 1-2). Memory and trauma obsessions are constantly fortified. An obsession with memory seems to be more likely to occur in moments of crisis, when memory is perceived as weak and endangered.
The idea of trauma has transcended its original academic boundaries, crossing over into a variety of discourses mainly the literary field. Literary works and their imaginary worlds provide nuanced responses to trauma. As a result, literary approaches to trauma have the capacity to elicit emotional identification as well as critical reflection. In fact, the objective of trauma writers is not just to make horrific, strange events more comprehensible and accessible, but also to act as a sort of seeing or testifying for historically disadvantaged people’s history and experience. In the same context, Whitehead (2004) adds that “the denied, the repressed and the forgotten” are frequently thematized in trauma fiction (p. 82). The essential paradox that distinguishes trauma narratives is frequently exposed and worked with in literary trauma texts. Luckhurst (2008) states that a trauma novel “issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge” (p.79). Trauma narratives provide significant challenges in terms of expressing what cannot be expressed, narrating what cannot be told, and making sense of what cannot be explained.

1. Trauma Transfer

After September 11, 2001, a massive number of fictional narratives have emerged which have formed an opulent collection that examines the effect of trauma on the individual and the community. This event has inspired authors to produce number of novels that deal with the attacks either directly or indirectly. Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is one of the novels that sheds light on the 9/11 terrorist attacks from the perspective of a 9 years old child who lost his father due to the plane crash into the World Trade Centre. This traumatic event has a tremendous effect on the psyche of Oskar. In fact, Oskar has a sense of guilt because he has been at home when his father called, but he could not pick up the phone. Besides, he has found a key in his father’s closet and he has been determined to discover the secret behind the key, which has been found in an envelope marked with the word “Black”. Hence, Oskar embarks his journey with the aim to uncover the mystery of the key.

Although the focal point of the narrative is 9/11 attacks, the novel alludes to other traumatic events mainly the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima during World War II. During Oskar's presentation on the
attacks, he plays an interview with a Japanese victim who describes the atrocities of this shuttering event while she has been seeking for her daughter Masako.

When I became conscious, I realized I wasn't standing. I had been thrown into a different room. The rag was still in my hand, but it was no longer wet. My only thought was to find my daughter. I looked outside the window and saw one of my neighbours standing almost naked. His skin was peeling off all over his body. It was hanging from his fingertips. I asked him what had happened. He was too exhausted to reply. He was looking in every direction, I can only assume for his family. I thought I must go. I must go and find Masako. (Foer, 2005, p.187)

By referring to those events, Foer gives the 9/11 attacks a global insinuation. He puts the event at the same level of World War II. The author connects the 9/11 event with the nuclear attack of Hiroshima and the bombing of the German city of Dresden during World War II to intensify the scope of trauma in the novel. The allusion to other traumatic events in the novel is very poignant. Ilka Saal (2011) refers to this strategy as “trauma transfer” (p. 454). Remarkable observations can be noticed while “evaluating a traumatic event through the lens of a previous one” (Saal, 2011, p. 454). The constant connection and transfer of one traumatic event to another in the novel mean that Foer seeks to rewrite other historical tragic events like World War II. The significance of trauma transfer can be noticed on another level. Foer’s fusion of the trauma of 9/11 with other traumatic incidents serves to go beyond identity line and exhibit communities that were subject to those catastrophic events on the same level.

Along with depicting the journey of Oskar to reveal the secret of his father’s key, the novel embarks on probing the historical dimensions of the 9/11 attacks through other subplots mainly the stories of Oskar’s grandparents who were victims of the bombing of Dresden during World War II. Thomas Shell, Oskar’s grandfather, survived the firebombing of Dresden. Many chapters of the novel present the letters he has written to his son but he has never sent any. Through these letters, the reader is introduced to the atrocities and the pain he experiences
during World War II. In one of the letters, he describes the moment the bombs fell on Dresden and how everything was burned within few minutes. Thomas Schell said that

The bombs were like a waterfall; I ran through the streets, from cellar to cellar and saw terrible things: legs and necks. I saw a woman, whose blond hair and green dress were on fire, running with a silent baby in her arms, I saw humans melted into thick pools of liquid, three or four feet deep in places, I saw bodies crackling like embers, laughing, and the remains of masses of people who had tried to escape the firestorm by jumping head first into the lakes and ponds. (Foer, 2005, p. 211)

The fact that Thomas Schell writes about the firebombing of his home city means that he wants to verbalize one of the catastrophic incidents he has lived. Dominick LaCapra discusses in his book *Writing Trauma, Writing History* the process of writing trauma. He states that:

Writing trauma would be one of those telling aftereffects in what I termed traumatic and post-traumatic writing (or signifying practice in general). It involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and "giving voice" to the past. (2001, p. 186)

The traumatic experiences of Thomas Schell have rendered him unable to speak. Thus, he resorts to writing his trauma in an attempt to cope with the past. Throughout his letters, he describes the last moment he saw his girlfriend Anna who asked him to be happy because she is pregnant. He said,

That was the last moment I ever saw her. At 9:30 that night, the air raid sirens sounded, everyone went to the shelters but no one hurried, we were used to the alarms we assumed they were false, why would anyone want to bomb Dresden? (Foer, 2005, p. 210)

Thomas Schell lost all his family in the attacks including his lover and his unborn child. It was extremely hard for him to forget about his wife, which results in him marrying Grandma, Anna’s sister. Grandma survives also the attacks on Dresden during World War II. She has lost
her entire family including her sister Anna. Although Grandma has endured the same suffering as her husband, she does not allocate large sections of her memories to describe in details war in her city. However, she talks about how she has lost her father in war in few sentences. She proclaims

I wanted to stay with him
But I knew he would want me to leave him.
I told him, Daddy, I have to leave you.
Then he said something.
It was the last thing he ever said to me. (Foer, 2005, pp. 308 – 309)

Grandma goes through fierce mourning for the past. Her present trauma makes her remember her painful past memories during the bombing of Dresden in 1945. She tries to depict her traumatic experiences in the letters she writes to her nephew Oskar. The fact that both Grandpa and Grandma retell their past horrific tragedies means that the past is still living in them and cannot be forgotten. Dominik LaCapra (2001) states that

in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinctions between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realizes one is living in the here and now with future possibilities. (pp. 46-47)

The stories told by Grandma and Grandpa give a historical context to the novel and enable the readers to look at the trauma of 9/11 in connections to other historical traumas. In fact, dealing with trauma is more complicated than merely remembering or reliving the events of the past. In fact, even though Grandma and Grandpa have experienced the same tragedies, they have different responses to their traumas. Thomas Schell fails to overcome his pains and sufferings. He even lost communication skills. He keeps a small notebook in which he writes down anything he intends to communicate. In contrast, Grandma tries to come to terms with her tragic experiences. This can be clearly perceived in her conversation with her husband when she felt that he is going to leave her after revealing to him that she is pregnant. He told her that he “do[es] not know how to live” (Foer, 2005, p. 181). She
answers back that she “do[es] not know either, but [she] is trying” (Foer, 2005, p. 181). In fact, all the letters that Grandpa and Grandma wrote were significantly important in the whole process of understanding the trauma of 9/11 in its wider historical context. As a matter of fact, Jonathan Safran Foer includes another segment in his narrative in which he juxtaposes the 9/11 attack with the atomic explosion of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The chapter “HAPPINESS, HAPINESS” sheds light on the horrific event of Hiroshima.

I saw a girl coming toward me. Her skin was melting down her. It was like wax. She was muttering, "Mother. Water. Mother. Water." I thought she might be Masako. But she wasn't. I didn't give her any water. I am sorry that I didn't. But I was trying to find my Masako. I ran all the way to Hiroshima Station. It was full of people. Some of them were dead. Many of them were lying on the ground. They were calling for their mothers and asking for water. (Foer, 2005, p. 188)

Oskar plays a recording to his classmates in which a Japanese woman describes her daughter dying in her arms. Tomoyasu’s main narrative revolves around her search to find her daughter in the morning of August 6, 1945. While she is narrating her quest for her daughter, she also describes the countless number of death and casualties due to Hiroshima bombing. Tomoyasu found her daughter Masako but she was in a dreadful state. “There were maggots in her wounds and a sticky yellow liquid. [The mother] tries to clean her up. But her skin was peeling off. The maggots were coming out all over. …Nine hours later she died” (Foer, 2005, pp. 188-189). The use of actual testimony in the novel gives the story more accuracy and authenticity.

The narrative strategy of trauma transfer used in Extremely Loud and incredibly Close enables the author to provide a historical background to the 9/11 event. By doing so, he allows readers to learn about other tragic occurrences that are connected to the novel's central theme, the 9/11 attacks. Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close exhibits how brutal demolition and human trauma go beyond the borders of nations and how traumatized individuals are united against their pains and sufferings.
2. The failure of Language and the Use of Visual Elements

In her book *Trauma Fiction*, Ann Whitehead (2004) states that “the term `trauma fiction' represents a paradox or contradiction: if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?” (p.3). In this context, one of the endeavors of Jonathan Safran Foer is to examine the failure of language to represent and approach past traumatic events, which are intrinsically unapproachable. Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub (1992) assert that

The act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing if the price of speaking is reliving; not relief, but further retraumatization … if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma – a re-experiencing of the event itself. (p. 167)

Trauma survivors do not find accurate language that can faithfully describe their horrible sufferings. In his book *Out of the Blue* (2009), Kristiaan Versluys affirms that

The three narrator-protagonists of the novel are faced with an ineffable trauma, an unspeakable truth, which they try to reveal through language. Their task is made difficult by the fact that these particular “disasters” are resistant to articulation. One of the destructive effects of trauma is its erasure of the ability to speak. (p. 79)

In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Caruth states that representations of traumatic memory engage in a “double telling”; “the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (p.7). Because of the deficiency of language to voice traumatic events, several characters in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* were unable to speak after the agonizing incidents that crushed their lives. Grandpa is depicted throughout the narrative as silently traumatized. Following the bombing of Dresden during the Second World War, Thomas Schell finds himself unable to
speak. In a letter that he wrote to his unborn child he admits that “[he] ha[s] n’t been always silent, [he] used to talk and talk and talk and talk, [he] couldn’t keep [his] mouth shut, the silence overtook [him] like a cancer” (Foer, 2005, p. 16). The first word he lost was "Anna" who was killed during the attacks on Dresden. The tremendous effect of the death of his entire family including his pregnant girlfriend Anna rendered him mute. Gradually, he loses all the words that can be used to communicate. Therefore, in order to communicate, with others, he uses a notebook on which he writes his own messages. Throughout the letters, we get to know about the past life of Thomas Schell, Sr. In one of the letters he wrote to his son, Grandpa said:

I have so much to tell you; the problem isn’t that I’m running out of time, I’m running out of room, this book is filling up, there couldn’t be enough pages. I looked around the apartment this morning for one last time, and there was writing everywhere, filling the walls and mirrors, I’d rolled up the rugs so I could write on the floors, I’d written on the windows and around the bottles of wine we were given but never drank, I wear only short sleeves, even when it’s cold because my arms are books, too. (Foer, 2005, p. 132)

Undoubtedly, Grandpa is a traumatized character whose past is extremely dark. Immediately after the death of his family especially his love Anna, he moved to USA where he met Anna’s sister, Grandma. The fact that Thomas Schell sr. got married to Grandma does not mean that he loved her. However, he just could not forget about his past love and Grandma reminded him of his late girlfriend. Versluys (2009) asserts that

By uniting their losses, they hope to give themselves a new lease on life and jointly to escape their pain. But Grandpa, in particular, is aware of the futility of the enterprise. The past throws such a long shadow that it voids the present. (p. 84)

The intensive traumatization of Grandpa makes him write long letters until they turn out black and unreadable. The loss of speech of Grandpa drives him to the act of nonstop writing, which makes him fill all the papers of his notebook in no time. When Grandpa tries to talk with
Grandma on the phone, he finds himself unable to speak. Thus, he creates a weird form of communication by pressing the numbers that represent letters leading to a coded message of incomprehensible language. Similarly, Grandma tries hard to write about her traumatic experiences in the wake of Dresden firebombing. However, she fails to give a clear description of the event. She produces several blank pages that are included in the novel. Grandma’s empty pages reflect her incapacity to voice her wounds.

Moreover, her grandson Oskar was also unable to verbalize one of the most traumatic incidents in his life. He often refers throughout the narrative to the traumatic event of 9/11 attacks as “the worst day” (Foer, 2005, p. 11). He cannot also talk about the last moment before his father’s death, which was the moment his father sent voice messages immediately before his death. The fact that Oskar did not picked the phone made him feel guilty. This sense of guilt deprived him from speaking even to his mother. Later, after finding a key in the bedroom of his dead father, Oskar took the decision to look for the lock that fit the key without consulting his mother. Oskar said that “[he] couldn’t talk to Mom, obviously, and even though Toothpaste and The Minch were [his] best friends, [he] couldn’t talk to them either” (Foer, 2005, p. 234). In order to atone for his guilt; he offered his mother a bead bracelet which was made by converting the last phone message of the father into a Morse code. Oskar said "I used sky blue beads for silence, maroon beads for breaks between letters, violet beads for breaks between words, and long and short pieces of string between the beads for long and short beeps, which are actually called blips" (Foer, 2005, p. 35). Yet, the mother was unable to comprehend the message of the bead bracelet. All these examples prove the failure of language to articulate traumatic past incidents. Hence, Foer resorts to other form of communicating trauma mainly the use of visual elements. When language fails to describe faithfully what happened at the moment of the catastrophic event, trauma survivors, as it is the case with Grandma, Grandpa, and Oskar, tend to invent other ways to represent trauma. In this context, Cathy Caruth (1995) explains that

When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience speech less terror. The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic
level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level. (p. 172)

Because of the inability of lexical items to reproduce traumatic experiences, images become the perfect tool to cope with trauma. Foer’s extensive use of photographic elements arouses huge criticism. Many critics believe that readers might be distracted with the immense employment of photographs while reading the narrative. In fact, Foer uses the images deliberately to convey the message that sometimes some traumatic events cannot be represented through language. He wants to emphasize that 9/11 terrorist attacks are remembered through images not through language. Mudge (as cited in Goncalves, 2016), affirms that

September 11 was the most visually documented event in human history. When we think of those events, we remember certain images – planes going into the buildings, people falling, the towers collapsing. That’s how we experience it; that is how we remember it. and I want to be true to that experience. (p. 189)

The novel centers on the horrible event of 9/11 as well as other historical events. Foer’s undertaking was to describe these catastrophic events by verbal and visual means. Versluys asserts that “an event like 9/11 is a rupture for everybody. As a consequence, there is a globalized need to comprehend, to explain, and to restore.” (p.4). From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to the scrapbook of Oskar, which is full of pictures that represent his journey while looking for the meaning of the mysterious key he found in the closet of his father. These pictures allow us to have access to the mind of Oskar who does not have credible language to talk about his journey. The most significant pictures in the novel are those that represent a falling man at the very end of the narrative. Throughout the novel, the traumatized boy tries very hard to know how his father died. Foer utilizes the well known photograph taken by Richard Drew of a falling man out of the World Trade Center during the September 11 attacks in a very clever way. Because of his strong desire to know how his father died, the traumatized boy imagined that the falling man in the picture is his father. Oskar said

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I want to stop inventing. If I could know he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn’t have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors, which happened to some people, and I wouldn’t have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were in widows on the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his. (Foer, 2005, p. 275)

Oskar reverses the sequence of the images in a flipbook in such a way that the falling man seems to be going back to the top of the building and returning to safety. In doing so, Foer wants to give a reasonable ending to the novel. Moreover, he wants to engage the readers in interpreting the closure of the narrative.

3. Trauma and Recovery

Sigmund Freud was the first psychologist to use the concepts of melancholy and mourning in relation to trauma. In his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud explains the difference between these two notions which are both a reaction against traumatic events. In fact, “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (p. 243). However,

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (p. 244)

The vehement aspect of a traumatic event impedes trauma survivors to make authentic reference to the tragic day because they did not manage to integrate the intensive effect of trauma into their memories. Moreover, the traumatic incident cannot be completely deleted from their memories. Hence, some trauma survivors find it very difficult to overcome and forget about those harsh and shocking moments in their
lives. Other victims managed to some extent to cope with trauma and endure their painful pasts. Dominick LaCapra elaborated two other concepts similar to the Freudian ones which are “acting out” and working through”. According to LaCapra (2001),

In acting out, one relives the past as if one were the other, including oneself as another in the past - one is fully possessed by the other or the other’s ghost; and in working through, one tries to acquire some critical distance that allows one to engage in life in the present, to assume responsibility - but that does not mean that you utterly transcend the past. It means that you come to terms with it in a different way related to what you judge to be desirable possibilities that may now be created, including possibilities that lost out in the past but may still be recaptured and reactivated, with significant differences, the present and future. (p. 148)

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, these concepts of acting out and working through are clearly manifested throughout the reaction of three main characters in the novel. While Oskar Shell and Grandma seem to cope with trauma and their responses to the traumatic event, that they have experienced, are a mixture of “acting out” and “working through”, Grandpa fails to come to terms with trauma and exhibit symptoms of “acting out” that hinder him from making a progress in his life. Cathy Caruth (1996) states that “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (p. 11).

Victims of traumatic events are entirely overwhelmed by the immensity of what they have gone through. Accordingly, trauma is tied to an idea of missing, something that cannot be grasped. Thomas Shell is one of the victims of World War II. Few moments before the attacks of Dresden, he was extremely cheerful because of the happy news that his girlfriend Anna was pregnant. He has never thought that those were the last happy moments of his life. The firebombing of Dresden brings about the death of Anna. Thomas Schell could not manage to move on in his life without his lover. The fact that he survived the firebombing
of Dresden while his pregnant girlfriend died made him feel extreme survival guilt. The trauma of living while his loved one died haunted the character for all of his life. He even thought that he is responsible for Anna’s death. This idea is clearly manifested in this passage

I’m sorry. … I’m sorry for everything. For having said goodbye to Anna when maybe I could have saved her and our idea, or at least died with them. I’m sorry for my inability to let the unimportant things go, for my inability to hold on to the important things. … I thought, it’s a shame that we have to live, but it’s a tragedy that we get to live only one life, because if I’d had two lives, I would have spent one of them with [his wife, Anna’s sister]. I would have stayed in the apartment with her … I would have spent that life among the living. (Foer, 2005, p. 133)

Thomas Shell held the belief that he does not deserve to live. He was powerless to live in the present situation. Likewise, he was completely unable to forget about the agonizing past. His vulnerability drives him to leave his wife (Anna’s sister) and his unborn child not because of his cruelty but mainly due to his inability to live a normal life. Thomas Shell’s name is very symbolic. His last name “Schell” suggests that he is just a shell. He is no longer a man with feelings and emotions. He is just a living body devoid of any sentiment. The current situation of Thomas Schell raises the question whether he is able to recover from trauma. Trauma recovery entails a complete acceptance of the past and present situations. A trauma survivor should not deny or subdue the traumatic experiences he has gone through. In contrast, he should accept and reconcile with his sufferings. That is to say “one remembers –perhaps to some extent still compulsively reliving or being possessed by – what happened then without losing a sense of existing and acting now” (LaCapra, 2001, p. 90). In Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Thomas Schell was completely incompetent to survive and accept his trauma. He was unable to share his tormenting experiences with others because he lost the ability of speech. Aphasia rendered him unable to use the tool of language to express himself. In fact, his loss of speech reflects his unwillingness to recover and come to terms with his traumatic past situations. Thomas Schell’s refusal to speak restrained him from making new relationships with his surroundings. The only
marriage relationship that he has made with Anna’s sister was doomed to failure. His fiasco was mainly attributed to the fact that he could not forget about his lover. Forgetting about the past is very crucial in Thomas Schell’s recovery. However, he continues to remember his past to the extent that he becomes obsessed with it. He realizes that if he forgets about the past he will be able to move in his life.

I never thought of myself as quiet, much less silent, I never thought about things at all, everything changed, the distance that wedged itself between me and my happiness wasn’t the world, it wasn’t the bombs and burning buildings, it was me, my thinking, the cancer of never letting go, is ignorance bliss, I don’t know, but it’s so painful to think, and tell me, what did thinking ever do for me, to what great place did thinking ever bring me? I think and think and think, I’ve thought myself out of happiness one million times, but never once into it. (Foer, 2005, p. 17)

Recalling the past becomes a necessity for Thomas Schell. For him, the death of Anna can be recompensed only by not forgetting her. The dilemma of forgetting and remembering renders him unable to speak at all. In fact, aphasia is a reflection of the psychological and the emotional turbulence he has been enduring.

Grandma is another main character in the novel that seems to cope with trauma to some extent. Mrs. Schell does not lose the ability of speech. Throughout the novel, she appeared to be accepting her trauma and trying hard to overcome it. Despite being abandoned by her husband, she managed to make a progress in her life. She was able to communicate with her relatives. She does not mind sharing her past memories with others. As a matter of fact, Thomas Schell encourages his wife to write down her memories. He believes that writing could help her come to terms with her traumatic experiences. However, Grandma’s attempts to write her memories were not very successful. She failed to write her memories because she was just hitting the space bar producing several empty pages that appear on several occasions in the novel. She admits as much in her letters to Oskar: “I went to the guest room and pretended to write. I hit the space bar again and again. My life story was spaces” (Foer, 2005, 176). Grandma’s admission
illustrates the underlying attitude that language is not only inadequate for expressing traumatic events, but also illegitimate.

Grandma exhibited some symptoms of “acting out” with trauma. She is also suffering from survival guilt. When she was a young girl, she used to collect letters. She kept blaming herself for her responsibility to fuel the fires that burn her house at Dresden. She said, “Sometimes I would think about those hundred letters laid across my bedroom floor. If I hadn’t collected them, would our house have burned less brightly?” (Foer, 2005, p. 83). Another incident in the novel that proves that Grandma does not recover completely from trauma is her profound sense of unworthiness. She constantly insulted herself before answering whenever her grandson Oskar needed her advice.

Overall, although Grandma was showing some aspects of trauma recovery, she was at some moments very weak to the extent that she tried to commit suicide. Her internal suffering drove her to inflict some harm on her body, which can be clearly seen in this passage

> When I no longer had to be strong in front of [Oskar], I became very weak. I brought myself to the ground, which was where I belonged. I hit the floor with my fists. I wanted to break my hands, but when it hurt too much, I stopped. I was too selfish to break my hands for my only child. … I had to go to the bathroom. I didn’t want to get up. I wanted to lie down in my own waste, which was what I deserved. I wanted to be a pig in my own filth. (Foer, 2005, 231)

The ability of Grandma to forget somehow about her traumatic experiences while she is awake, nightmares haunted her while she was sleeping that proved her inner anguish. We get to know about this through her conversation with her grandson Oskar

> ‘How did you sleep, darling? Over.’… ‘Fine,’… ‘no bad dreams. Over.’…Some nights I took the two-way radio into bed with me and rested it on the side of the pillow that [the cat] Buckminster wasn’t on so I could hear what was going on in her bedroom. Sometimes she would wake me up in the middle of the night. It gave me heavy boots that she had nightmares,
because I didn’t know what she was dreaming about and there was nothing I could do to help her. She hollered, which woke me up, obviously, so my sleep depended on her sleep, and when I told her, ‘No bad dreams,’ I was talking about her. (Foer, 2005, 104)

Grandma is wavering between acting out and working through. Although she was able to move on in her life, she did not manage to erase completely her traumatic past and continued to live as a trauma survivor.

Oskar Schell is another traumatized and complex character in the novel that also shows features of acting out and working through. From the very beginning of the novel, Oskar is depicted as a very smart and unique boy. His relationship with his father was very strong. The death of his father in the 9/11 attacks tormented him deeply. At a certain point in the novel, he meditated on the importance of being alive. He said

I wondered, for the first time in my life, if life was worth all the work it took to live. What exactly made it worth it? What’s so horrible about being dead forever, and not feeling anything, and not even dreaming? What’s so great about feeling and dreaming? (Foer, 2005, 145)

Despite the fact that Oskar expressed a death wish, he was afraid of death. His fear of death appeared in several points in the novel. To illustrate, Mr. Black asked Oskar if he wanted to drink coffee but Oskar replied “Coffee!” “It stunts my growth, and I’m afraid of death” (Foer, 2006, 154). Certainly, Oskar encapsulates symptoms of trauma. Before the death of his father, Oskar was living a happy life. However, the death of his father makes him “wear heavy boots” which is an expression used by Oskar to show sadness and depression. After he found, the mysterious key, he was determined to embark on a journey to find the lock. The journey is, in fact, very symbolic as it epitomizes Oskar’s quest to unlock his trauma. Throughout the journey, Oskar showed very hard features of trauma as it is shown in the following passage:
Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I’m not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers, and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall building turbans. (Foer, 2005, p. 36)

“Acting out” can plainly be seen in Oskar’s inability to share what he is going through with his mother. In contrast, he was able to share his experiences with strangers. Oskar’s unwillingness to talk with his mother is closely connected to another feature of trauma which is extreme anger. In several instances in the novel, Oskar reveals bursts of rage and anger especially toward his mother. As an illustration, in one of Oskar’s conversations with his mother he told her “if I could have chosen, I would have chosen you [to die instead of Dad]” (Foer, 2005, p. 171).

In addition to showing spasms of irritation, Oskar inflicted physical violence on his classmate Jimmy Sneider during the school performance of Hamlet. He also directed his sudden violence on himself when he said, “if I had been alone, I would have given myself the biggest bruise of my life. I would have turned myself into one big bruise” (Foer, 2005, p. 295). Oskar’s violence toward himself reflects his inner pain of losing his father. Toward the end of the novel, he shows a transformation from showing features of “acting out” to “working through”. Oskar told his mother all the secrets that he had been hiding especially his constant attempts to find the fitting lock of the key. To his surprise, his mother knew everything about him. Oskar was very disappointed when he found the secret behind the mysterious key as what he found was not what he hoped for. He was looking for something that will bring him close to his father. However, what he found is that he came to his mother especially when he discovered that she knew everything about him from the very beginning.

To conclude, the literary response to 9/11 was first restricted due to writers' inability to articulate what had happened; but as time passed
and the rubble and ashes of New York City had evaporated, post-9/11 fiction began to appear in greater numbers. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer is one of those narratives that attracts the attention of readers due to its use of the Dresden and Hiroshima bombings in conjunction with 9/11, making comparisons between two devastating occurrences of vastly different natures and times. In fact, it is quite challenging to communicate horrific events. The novel's discontinuous structure supports this idea by highlighting the limitations of words when dealing with trauma while also giving the readers a comprehensive view of the situation, allowing them to learn from the characters' experiences and responses. Besides, visual writing and the use of non-textual narrative techniques are also important aspects of the work. Jonathan Safran Foer uses graphic and visual elements to illustrate the horrific experience that words and language sometimes fail to communicate. Through graphic depictions of painful memory, Foer intends to establish the reader's strong sense of sympathy for the victim. The novel's use of images might thus be interpreted as a reflection on how important images are in the building of a collective memory of 9/11, as well as a hint at how historiography blurs fact and fiction. Furthermore, all the three characters that I have been discussing are traumatized. Thomas Schell is completely unable to cope with trauma. He fails to forget about the past and is incapable of showing a certain kind of progress. In contrast, his wife and his grandson, Oskar, both display a mixture of “acting out” and “working through”. Although Grandma wants to commit suicide on two points in the novel, she manages to overcome the trauma of losing all of her family in the Dresden firebombing, and losing her son in the World Trade Center attacks. In addition, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the death of Thomas Schell junior has extreme negative effects on the psyche of Oskar. He is so sad and depressed about the loss of his father. However, at the end of the novel, he finds a way to deal with all the circumstances that has faced him.

**References**


