

“I Just Stopped Being Able to Express the Want:” Trauma and Body Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

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Abstract

The study aims to examine the function of the body in projecting trauma when language fails to express earlier traumatic events in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). Shedding light on the connection between corporeality and trauma, the study specifically examines how the traumas of Foer’s characters return through the cracks of their consciousness in a form of unconscious corporeal reactions, melancholia, fear and separation from the self or what psychologists call “the Double.” It also seeks to show how Foer’s characters heal from their earlier traumatic memories especially that language is inadequate in expressing traumatic experiences. In order to investigate both the role of corporeality in expressing the characters’ earlier traumatic events, and the possibility of healing from these psychic wounds, the study leans on a distillation of the most significant trauma theories including Sigmund Freud’s metaphoric focus on corporeality’s role in projecting trauma, and Cathy Caruth’s research on how trauma is expressed via corporeal manifestations. Through a textual analysis of Foer’s novel, the study shows that the characters’ corporeal unconscious manifestations of their anxiety, their physical and psychic wounds are a part of their healing process that takes place especially through writing, interacting and narrating their traumatic events.

Keywords: Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Corporeality of trauma, Self-harm, and Healing process.

Introduction

Due to different historical traumatic events such as the Two World Wars, the Cold War and 9/11 New York attacks in 2001, psychologists and theorists of trauma write intensively on the issue of how individuals can express their psychic wounds. Sigmund Freud, for example, based his studies on traumatized soldiers of World War I and the Jewish Holocaust survivors during World War II. He focused on the overwhelming effects of these historical events on individuals and how these survivors express their traumas. He equally hinted to the role of soma in projecting different psychic wounds. After Freud’s researches, the manifestation of trauma is seen as a specter that haunts discourses of history, literary

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theory and psychoanalysis. Contemporary literary theorists of trauma shed light on the notion that language is no longer valid to express different traumas. Kali Tal (1996), Deborah Horvitz (2000) and Dominick Lacapra (2001) draw on Freud's implicit references to the corporeal expression of trauma to reveal that corporeality or the body can be an alternative that can project unspeakable experiences.

This study, therefore, is an attempt to highlight the correlation between the body and trauma as they appear in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). Specifically, it sheds light on how the bodies of the three traumatized characters, Oskar Shell and his grandparents, express their traumatic memories. It equally deals with the three characters' possibility to heal through regaining the power to speak and to narrate their traumas in a form of language. In order to achieve these goals, the study seeks to answer the following questions: what is corporeality of trauma? Can trauma project itself in a bodily form? What are the corporeal reactions used as a tool for expressing trauma? What are the different corporeal symptoms presented in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*? And how can a trauma victim successfully heal from trauma? To deal with these questions, the study engages with various theoretical propositions on trauma and its projection via soma; particularly Freud, Caruth, Judith Herman and Dominick Lacapra's psychoanalytic studies. Methodologically speaking, in exploring the idea of corporeality of trauma, this study employs textual and analytical approaches in analysing the link between trauma and the body in Foer's novel. Since the body is claimed to be controlled by the victim's traumatic experience, the study applies the previously mentioned theorists' works to prove this claim and to grasp the healing process in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) is a post 9/11 fiction novel. It highlights the issue of trauma through three different characters, Oskar and his grandparents. Oskar is a nine-year clever boy who lost his father in one of the attacked towers. His grandparents are victims of another traumatic event which is the Dresden firebombing in 1945. In the novel, the author reveals that language is no longer an effective tool for expressing trauma; as a result, the victims project their traumas through unconscious mental and physical reactions. In "Visualised Incomprehensibility of Trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*," Sien Uytterschout sheds light on the effects of trauma on the characters of the novel stating that "the effects of trauma are not only manifest in the behaviour of Oskar and his grandparents, they also find bodily expression" (2008, 67). He adds that the characters cannot project their psychic wounds at a linguistic level. Henceforth, they unconsciously harm their own bodies as a way of self-expression. He notes: "Whenever he is disappointed (with himself or with others), Oskar bruises himself. Grandfather Schell cannot talk" (Uytterschout 2008, 67), adding that those bodily traumatic manifestations result in more traumatic repression as the characters such as Oskar tend to "push back his (physical) pain threshold. The pain of bruising himself" (2008, 67). The story also gives a large space for trauma interpretation in the way the study situates Foer's novel in the American frame of trauma referring to cultural melancholia.

It is worth noting that corporeality of trauma was not a common concept in psychoanalysis. It is traced in Freud's earliest studies in the late ninetieth century. In his *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), Freud draws more attention to the dynamics of trauma stressing its symptoms. He asserts that whenever the

“I Just Stopped Being Able to Express the Want:” Trauma and Body Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

conscious refuses to accept a certain traumatic event, the unconscious makes it return as somatic symptoms, and shapes it in some particular traumatic repetitive behaviors. Freud highlights that traumatic events reside in the individual’s unconsciousness and that they will return through the cracks of the individual’s consciousness in corporeal medium. In his essay the “Uncanny” (1919), Freud argues that the repressed traumatic memories force the patient to create multiple projections of himself. This new self is strange and unfamiliar, and it is manipulated and controlled by his own repression. This repression results in the appearance of uncanny feelings: “For this, the uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud 1919, 12). However, once those traumatic memories return to the surface whether in the form of hallucinations or in a clear vision, it is totally unconscious as Caruth mentioned in her writings on the corporeal manifestation of trauma.

As a result, he made his way again to trauma theory in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In this work, he focuses more on the symptoms and the aftermath of trauma. Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) is an important touchstone book for the discussion of trauma and corporeality. In it, he connects traumatic neurosis with Jewish history to highlight the dynamics of repression and outline his concept of latency. In his analogy between Jewish monotheism and the neurotic process, Freud refers to the return of earlier traumatic memories in the form of a “foreign body.” Through Freud’s notes, one can mark that this unconscious process manifests in corporeal and material realm in the metaphor of the foreign body, that refers to the notion that there is something new added to the body system which is separated from the mind to be free from any control and to create self-division.

In his book, Freud goes a step further accentuating the notion that the time between the happening of the traumatic incident and its reappearance is labelled “the incubation period” (1939, 109), in which traumatized subjects are marooned in time as they cannot distinguish between the past and the present. Although Freud, throughout his studies, indicates that the enunciation of earlier traumatic events is a complicated act, especially with traumas that are not accessible to the conscious mind, he uses metaphor to deal with the somatic manifestation of earlier traumatic memories. As a result, his theorization on trauma and its articulation via corporeal manifestations remains metaphoric. He emphasizes the psychological nature of trauma, leaving the body as a marginalized entity.

Although Freud made an indirect reference to the corporeality of trauma, his studies become an exemplary model and useful tool for further contemporary trauma studies. After the two World Wars, a lot of scientists and psychologists tried to find an alternative voice to express different traumas. Their first aim was to make the dynamics of trauma more comprehensible and to find the right way to healing. Cathy Caruth, for instance, is a Freudian follower who, in *Trauma Exploration in Memory*, defines trauma as: “a wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim’s experience of time, self and the world and that causes great emotional anguish in the individual” (1995, 3-4). In the same context, she describes trauma, in her book *Unclaimed Experiences*, as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” (1996, 12), explaining that trauma belatedly returns through the cracks of the subject’s consciousness in the form of hallucinations and hearing ghost voices.

Different psychoanalytic studies have dealt with trauma and its haunting nature. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), Dominick Lacapra argues that the persisting nature of traumatic memories immerses traumatized subjects in a time when they cannot distinguish between the past, the present and the future. He takes Freud's terms "Mourning" and "Melancholia" and employed them to coin his two concepts "Acting Out" and "Working Through," indicating that they are processes through which traumatized subjects repeat their traumatic experiences as fresh memories so that they can come to terms with their past. Lacapra adds that "Acting out" and "Working through" are related, they are not completely different. Both of them belong to the same process of memory. The difference between the two falls on their effect on the traumatized subject. While the first one is free from any chance of healing and only pushes the victim to more trauma. The second offers a way out of the traumatic situation. In her work, *Memory*, Anne Whitehead deals with the development of the concept of memory in relation to the body. She argues that traumatic experiences are "not subject to the usual narrative or verbal mechanism of recall, but is instead organized as bodily sensations, behavioral re-enactment" (2008, 115). On this basis, one says that corporeal symptoms such as general anxiety, depression, fear, flashbacks, and hallucinations keep haunting traumatized people and prevent them from being normal again. Furthermore, those symptoms are highly associated with the body especially when soma is triggered by the traumatic event to appear in corporeal manifestation.

Accordingly, critical studies on trauma become prominent in the postmodern era especially with the different traumatic historical events that the world witnessed. Writers start employing the theory of trauma in their texts, showing that this era is marked by high social conflicts, poverty, violence, and most importantly by wars. Accordingly, Laurie Vickroy, in her book, *Reading Trauma Narratives*, states: "trauma fiction emerges out of postmodernist fiction and shares its tendency to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit" (2002, 82). There are different references to trauma's manifestation via corporeality. The contemporary fiction writers such as Toni Morrison and Dorothy Allison were the first ones to apply the theory of corporeality of trauma by transmitting it through their characters to make the readers understand the dynamics of it and to sense its tragedy. Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) is another literary example, in which the author deals with configuration and re-configuration of Marian MacAlpin's identity. Because of the patriarchal codes, Marian is depicted as a traumatized subject who unconsciously deploys her body as a means to defy and to resist such control and also to express her psychic wounds.

Trauma in Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the study hypothesizes that the traumas of Foer's characters return through the cracks of their consciousness to be manifested in the form of unconscious corporeal reactions, melancholia, fear and separation from the self or what psychoanalytic critics call "the double." It is worth highlighting that the body of criticism dealing with trauma's representation via corporeal manifestations in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* seems to be limited and not totally focused. In "Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*,"

“I Just Stopped Being Able to Express the Want:” Trauma and Body Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

Sien Uytterschout and Kristiaan Versluys present a reading of Foer’s work based on Freud’s theorization on trauma as a process of “Melancholia and Mourning.” They make an attempt to define the two terms stating that “[m]elancholia and mourning both apply to memory. Typical reactions to trauma comprise either a repression of all trauma-related memory or an endeavour to remember the event and fit it into a coherent whole” (2008, 216). They apply the fragments of both concepts to the traumatized characters in Foer’s novel by analysing the traumatic symptoms following each process. In doing so, they explain that the characters are stuck between the desire of reliving the past which is a melancholic feature, and the will to live their present and to cope with trauma which is a part of the mourning process.

Ilka Saal, in her paper “Regarding the Pain of Self and Other: Trauma Transfer and Narrative Framing in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*,” analyses the novel from the perspective of trauma’s enunciation. She investigates the possibility of trauma’s narration, stating that “trauma, in order to be communicated and integrated into one’s personal knowledge of the past as well as that of the collective, must be narrativized” (2001, 459). For Saal, in order to come to terms with trauma, the traumatized person must turn his/ her traumatic experience into a coherent narration. This latter will eventually lead the victim of trauma to the process of healing. Saal is one of few critics who mention healing in Foer’s work. She also stresses the characters’ perception of trauma by analyzing their traumatic behaviours. Unlike her peers, Saal’s aim is to justify the characters’ behaviours in relation to their trauma’s narration. Critics of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* such as Remetir Trisha and Philippe Godde have published some trauma interpretations about the work and contributed in examining the traumatic journey of characters as well as their coping process through presenting a slight healing analysis. Moreover, only few of them have sparsely mentioned the effect of trauma on the body. Yet, none of them tackles the theme of the corporeality of trauma or the journey of healing in this novel. Unlike the previous studies, this study will examine trauma in the novel from a new approach by presenting all the corporeal aspects of trauma’s manifestation and providing a deep analysis of the characters’ healing process.

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Foer creates three traumatized characters out of two traumatic events. He smoothly connects their traumas, but at the same time, he separates their stories. Accordingly, language is one of the most complicated struggles that the three traumatized characters face in the novel. This struggle is expressed in two ways; the struggle of not being able to share and to describe trauma in words, and the struggle of losing language as it is mentioned in Kali Tal’s *Language and Trauma* where she indicates that language is unable to express traumatic events. These two levels are among the different aspects of the corporeality of trauma. Scientifically speaking, this case is called Aphasia.

The relation between trauma and aphasia was justified in Alexander. R. Luria’s book *Traumatic Aphasia*, in which he states: “the appearance of aphasia following trauma [...] is usually due to a blockade of speech function” (1970, 40). Luria explains that aphasia results in a complete loss of the ability to express the experience of trauma: “usually, the severe, total form of aphasia [...] is seen in complicated cases where destruction of brain tissues has proceeded beyond the limits of these areas and

involves deeper portions of the brain. Thus the complete disappearance of speech functions involves not simply a speech block, but constitutes a total loss of speech” (Luria 1970, 38). On this basis, this part provides a clear sight of the three main characters’ trauma and its projection on both psychological and physical corporeal levels. It precisely sheds light on trauma’s projection on their bodies in a form of melancholia, fear, self-destruction and the phenomenon of the double due to the inadequacy of language as a medium of expression.

Oskar Shell’s Traumatic Memories and their Corporeal Manifestation

The 1945 Dresden firebombing and the 9/11 attacks have cost the three main characters (Oskar and his grandparents) the life of their most close and beloved ones. Oscar Schell, the protagonist of the story, lost his father in one of the trade towers on September 9/11. Oskar’s relationship with his father plays a major role in complicating his trauma. He adores his father and thinks that he is smarter than anyone he has ever known: “I loved having a dad who was smart” (Foer 2005, 22). This is why he imitates his way of thinking and reacting to things. He always asks his father scientific questions that normally a boy at his age would not think about. Oskar is a very clever boy who loved to test his cleverness through some games with his father like reconnaissance expedition. Their strong relationship makes it hard for Oskar to accept his death. After losing his father, Oskar loses the sense of life. Therefore, he would always think about how his father died and invent ways that would have saved him: “because if you were on the ninety-fifth floor, and a plane hits below you, the building could take you to the ground, and everyone could be safe” (14). His brain is tied up with the traumatic event and the fear to lose the memory of his father. As a result, he endlessly speaks and thinks about his father and the way he used to act and react to things when he was alive.

Suppressing feelings is what Oskar has been doing since the death of his father. He never speaks a word about how he feels or what troubles him. This justifies Caruth’s view on trauma as an unspeakable experience. He has not told his mother or anyone else that his father called before he died and that he could not answer. Oskar wants to delete the incident and act as if nothing happened by replacing their phone with a new similar one so that his mother will never find out about the voice messages. Furthermore, he always has a sense of struggle inside him between what he wants to say and what he ends up saying: “Yo-yo Moi! I told him, grabbing it back, what I really wanted to tell him was you are not my dad, and you will never be” (Foer 2005, 13). Despite his anger, the words betray him; he just keeps hiding everything that would expose his misery.

Oskar does not show any attempt or will to narrate his feelings or his story. For him, hiding them is the best solution. However, trauma manifests itself in a corporeal realm. It is very hard to use words that describe his state. What is interesting is how he could form a collection of words and behaviors in his mind that reflect his emotions, but he never gives them the permission to be set free out of its prison. This is evident in the novel when the therapist asks Oskar to think that there is any good that can come from his father’s death: “I kicked over my chair, threw his papers across the floor, and hollered, no! Of course not, you fucking asshole! That was what I wanted to do. Instead I just shrugged my shoulders” (Foer

“I Just Stopped Being Able to Express the Want:” Trauma and Body Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer’s
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005)

2005, 184). It is clear that Oskar is good at hiding his feelings, but the thing that he hides best is his traumatic memory. He has many traumatic repressions, starting from the attack itself to his father’s death. Sharing this with others is impossible for Oskar; this is what justifies the impossibility of trauma narration in Oscar’s case. Here, Oskar’s traumatic memory of losing his father returns through the cracks of his consciousness in the form of bodily imitation. Oskar says: “I shrugged my shoulders, just like dad used to” (91).

Oskar further invents unreal things to keep track of his father’s memory. He declares: “I could invent a teakettle that reads in dad’s voice” (12). When Oscar listens to his father’s voice messages, in which he informs him that he is trapped in the building, he just stands stiff. The shock of the moment prevents his body from producing any reactions. This incident pictures the start of the corporeal manifestation of his trauma. His body is possessed by his unconsciousness. Not only does Oskar have to listen to the last words of his father, but he also witnesses his last call that he could not pick up. At that moment, trauma already takes over his body: “There were four more messages from him: one at 9:12, one at 9:31, one at 9:46, and one at 10:04. I listened to them, and listened to them again, and before I had time to figure out what to do, or even what to think or feel, the phone started ringing” (Foer 2005, 24).

Different psychoanalytic theorists and critics use the Freudian concept of melancholia, highlighting that due to different traumatic events, traumatized subjects are marooned in time as they cannot distinguish between the past and the present. In *Trauma and Recovery: the Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Judith Lewis Herman coins the term “Chronic Trauma,” suggesting that the haunting nature of earlier traumatic memories forges a state of “double think” (1992, 3), in which the subject’s mind goes back and forth in time with the disturbing intersection of the past and the present. In *Cultural Melancholia: US Trauma Discourses Before and After 9/11* (2015), Christina Cavedon examines 9/11 fiction, particularly Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* to highlight the American culture before and after the 9/11 approached with melancholia as an analytical concept, showing how the characters are stuck in the past. This is exactly the state of Oskar. Being melancholic means being forced to relive your past through flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations. Since his father’s death, Oskar chains his mind to that worst day. He is not only living the past over again, but his past also lives in him. All he cares about is how to relive this past. He tries so hard to imitate his father’s way of thinking and acting and holds tight to anything that would keep his memory fresh in his mind: “So it will be ok if I throw away all of your things and forget about you after you die?” (Foer 2005, 99). As time passes by, Oskar lives in an unreal world; he invents so many different stories through his imagination about how his father and the people in the building have reacted to the accident before their death.

Oskar’s imagination goes wild to the extent that he hallucinates about being attacked the same way his father was: “my brain started misbehaving, and the whole time I was imagining a plane coming at the building, just below us [...] I imagined the last second when I would see the pilot’s face who would be a terrorist” (Foer 2005, 223). In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), Kali Tal argues that language does not manifest trauma, and, thus, language fails to express traumatic events. She adds that traumatic memories keep haunting traumatized subjects, leading them to suffer from Post-traumatic

stress disorder. The latter can be considered as a direct corporeal projection of trauma. In their studies on trauma, Herman and Bessel A. Van Der Kolk maintain that repeated traumatic events break the subject's coherent sense of self. Herman, for instance, notes that after experiencing a traumatic event "the human system of self-preservation seems to go on onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment" (Herman 1992, 25). Therefore, most of trauma victims suffer from fear and anxiety as a direct result of post-traumatic stress disorder.

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Foer introduces another important symptom related to the body, which is anxiety. This can be seen when Oskar suffers from many fears such as the fear of dying in another terrorist attack. Oskar's anxiety is triggered by the traumatic event of his father's death to the point that he starts developing several new fears. Oskar thinks that everything that could threaten his life is something he must stay away from because of his fear of the possibility of the recurrence of his father's death. Oskar constantly wants to die to put an end to his suffering. These thoughts stem from his feelings of insecurity and melancholy. However, conversation between Oskar and his mother reveals that he is terrified of the idea of being suddenly dead and buried.

Self-harm is a defensive strategy used by the victim to cope with trauma. In *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud implies that dissociative behaviors are associated with hysterical persons who can neither regulate things nor control their stress (Freud 2004, 305). In "Self-Medication, Traumatic Re-enactments and Somatic Expression in Bulimic and Self-Mutilating Behaviour," Sharon K. Farber, a Trauma theorist, who focuses on the destructive and dissociative behaviours as cutting and purging that traumatized subjects unconsciously use to regulate things, writes about the issue of harming one's own body (1997, 169). In Foer's novel, the physical torture is highly depicted through the three traumatized characters. Oskar, for instance, expresses his desire to hurt his body constantly in the novel: "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, 271). Whenever he fails to do something or misses his father, he gives himself a bruise to gain a sense of empowerment. Seeing his mother playing music and cracking up with her friend makes Oscar extremely angry. Furthermore, whenever Oskar listens to his father's messages, he punishes himself for two reasons: first his father did not leave a last word for him. Secondly, he fails to answer the phone call, in which he could have heard those words he wished to hear. Giving himself a bruise is the punishment that Oskar thinks he deserves, but, in fact, it is the scar that trauma draws on his body.

Oskar's traumatic memory of his father's death returns to his consciousness in other dimensions of the trope of the foreign body; namely the archetype of the double. The haunting nature of Oskar's trauma forces him to unconsciously create multiple projections of himself or what Freud calls "the Double" (1939, 152). This split drives Oskar to feel that his body is acting differently since his mind and body work separately as if the mind loses control over his body. This separation leads to the creation of the foreign body, which is a division within the self and the body that makes Oskar feels as a double as it was explained by Freud and Herman or what Ronald Laing in *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960), calls: "the false self-system"(74). In a session with his therapist, Oskar depicts his self-division by saying: "I feel too much, that is what is going on. Do you think one can feel too much?"

“I Just Stopped Being Able to Express the Want:” Trauma and Body Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

(Foer 2005, 183) Here, Oskar admits that his mind and his body do not follow each other to create self-unity. Instead, his body rebels against his mind through disobeying the logical orders of the brain to form what Freud calls the foreign body. This corporeal projection can be seen when Oskar thinks and behaves in two different ways, causing a split between the self and the body.

Living with the feeling of guilt is hard to deal with. That is why Oskar tortures himself whether physically or psychologically. In this light, one can say that the corporeality of trauma in Oskar’s case is highly projected. Oskar sinks into misery. He also surrenders to his dark thoughts which take over his mind. Oskar believes that he should be in grief for eternity. He cannot allow himself to be happy or to move on. He does not want his mother to be happy or to do anything that makes her happy. He does not want her to have happy dreams, asserting that: “if she had been dreaming something happy, I would have been angry at her for dreaming something happy” (105). This shows how he sticks to the past, and how he is not willing to accept the truth. Being happy is a betrayal to his father, however, burying himself in sadness and acting as if there is nothing worth living for is his way to light up his father’s memory alive. Oskar strives to re-direct his life in an organized manner, yet the past cannot disappear.

The Corporeal Enunciation of Thomas Schell’s Trauma

Thomas Schell (Oskar’s Grandfather) is a survivor of the Dresden firebombing. He was not taken by the shock of the event but by the death of his first and only lover Anna who was his purpose of life. Her death distracts him from focusing on the horrific details of the war and places itself as the biggest traumatic threat over his conscious mind. Losing her means losing his connection with the world around: “the meaning of my thoughts started to float away from me, like leaves that fall from a tree into the river, I was the tree, and the world was the river” (26). In Thomas’s case, the author shows that the grandfather goes through both levels of the inability of language to express his psychic wounds. Thomas starts to lose the ability to speak gradually as he states: “I have not always been silence, I used to talk and talk and talk and talk, I could not keep my mouth shut, the silence overtook me like a cancer” (26). The words start to float away from him one after another until he becomes totally silent. The first word he has lost is the name of his lover Anna.

Thomas starts to lose the words that he badly needs to use: “want was a word I lost early on, which is not to say I stopped wanting things--- I wanted things more--- I just stopped being able to express the want” (Foer 2005, 26). His silence prevents him from expressing his thoughts and feelings. No matter how hard he tries to break it, he fails: “I wanted to say, of course, I wanted to ask is anything alright? I wanted to pull the thread, unravel the scarf of my silence and start again from the beginning, but instead, I said I” (Foer 2005, 27). Then, Thomas loses the last word he could pronounce and his silence becomes complete. He loses the battle against his silence. As a solution, he starts to write in order to communicate with others. It is a way to express his needs because he has lost the desire to express himself and to tell his story with the loss of his voice. Continuously, he refuses to receive any help to break his silence. His wife constantly tries to encourage him to move on: “she was extending a hand that I did not know how to take,

so I broke its fingers with my silence” (31). As it appears in the quotes above, Thomas buries his feelings and memory inside himself.

In speaking about the possibility of the recurrence of past events, one must mention Oskar’s Grandfather (Thomas) whose past and present are mixed to formulate his Melancholy: “I am thinking of Anna, I would give everything never to think about her again, I can only hold on the things I want to lose” (Foer 2005, 109). This quote shows how the past and the memory of Anna are overwhelming the thoughts of Thomas. The glimpse of the flashbacks of her death troubles his memory all the time: “there was a single thought in my head: keep thinking. Thinking would keep alive. But now I am alive, and thinking is killing me, I think and think and think. I cannot stop thinking about that night” (195). His traumatic experience is a shadow that traces his way from past to present. Through those symptoms, the traumatic past manages to find and occupy a large space in his present life.

Due to the fragility of his consciousness, Thomas’s alienation, and the fragmentation of his memory, his trauma returns to the surface in the form of fear and anxiety as dimensions of corporeal manifestations of his trauma. The fears of Thomas were revealed through a conversation between him and his grandson, Oskar: “I lost him before he died. How? I went away. Why? He wrote, I was afraid. Afraid of what? Afraid of losing him” (297). At this point of time, Oskar still does not know that the renter in his grandmother’s apartment is actually his real grandfather. Thomas tells his grandson that he lost his sole son (Oskar’s father) long before he died. He did not have the chance to meet his son because he left Oskar’s grandmother when she had been pregnant. Thomas’s loss of Anna is the reason behind his fear of losing his unborn child. He could not accept the idea of losing another precious person in his life.

In his essay on the “Uncanny,” Freud mentions that traumatic events cause a sort of dread, fear and anxiety in the person’s daily life. Using Freud’s words, one may argue that fear forces Thomas to leave his wife and to never think of coming back. This is how trauma works to destroy one’s psyche and urges him to hide his fears instead of facing them. It is common for trauma survivors to be haunted by guilt as they tend to blame themselves for being the only survivors or for not being able to save the dead ones. Julia Kristeva (1982) maintains that: “this guilt leads the subjects to a feeling of nothingness” (Kristeva 1982, 84). In the novel, Thomas keeps on blaming himself for not being able to save Anne: “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” (119). As he blames himself for the death of his lover Anna, Thomas’s whole life turns into aches as nothing could fill in the void that Anna has left inside him.

It is worth noting that the event has overwhelming psychological effects on Thomas: “the distance that wedged itself between me and my happiness was not the world, it was not the bombs and burning buildings, it was me my thinking, the cancer of never letting go, is ignorance a bliss, I do not know, but it is so painful to think” (Foer 2005, 27). Thomas is so helpless and desperate. He tries to move on by marrying Anna’s sister, but this marriage brings the worst results as she always keeps reminding him of Anna and wondering how life would be if he is still with Anna. The end of the traumatic event is not the end of his torture, but it is the start of a horrible nightmare. He keeps torturing himself because for him “the end of suffering does not justify the suffering, and so there is no end to suffering” (Foer 2005, 32).

“I Just Stopped Being Able to Express the Want:” Trauma and Body Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

Thomas’s way of punishing himself is a bit different from Oskar’s. The grandfather never admits that he actually hurts his body. During the Dresden firebombing, Thomas was on his way to save Anna, but he could not because he was injured and brought to hospital. Describing what happened to him in the hospital, Thomas says: “I saw that I was strapped to the bed, a nurse was standing beside me, I asked, why have you done this to me? She told me I had been trying to hurt myself” (Foer 2005, 194). The first thing he does after waking up is to unconsciously try to hurt himself. Deep inside him, he knows that he could not save her and this is a sin for which he must be punished.

The Somatic Manifestation of the Trauma of Oskar’s Grandmother

It is worth noting that Oskar’s grandmother is the only character who does not lose her language or the ability of speaking despite her traumatic experience during and after the Dresden attacks. In contrast with Oskar and her husband, the grandmother is eager to share her traumatic experience of the Dresden attacks, but she could not find the right person to reveal it. Her husband refuses to talk or to give her any chance to do so. The only time she fails to express herself is when she has to bury her son’s empty coffin and bury her feelings with it: “all of my sounds were lock inside me” (Foer 2005, 211). Oskar’s grandmother was not shadowed as the other two characters in the novel. She seems to have very few symptoms that one would question whether she was a traumatized character or not. Yet, it is clear that she suffers from a mental disconnection within her conscious and unconscious mind. On the day of the 9/ 11 event and before she knows that her son is dead or even that he is in the tower, she feels absolutely nothing about the incident. Remembering that day, Oskar’s grandmother expresses how indifferent to event she was: “I did not feel anything when they showed the burning building. I was not even surprised” (203). In other words, the grandmother’s mind cannot keep up with any new tragedy and what she had seen was enough for her. Apparently, her mind cannot keep up with any new tragedy and what she had already seen was enough for her. She thought that there was nothing that could ever transcend what she went through in the Dresden attacks. In her book, *Trauma Exploration in Memory*, Caruth states that “trauma targets the mind to break its experience of time, self and the world” (3-4). Using Caruth’s words, one notes that Oskar’s grandmother is also haunted by the past through nightmares and hallucinations. Remembering one of her haunting traumatic memories, Oskar’s grandmother recalls: “then he said something. I cannot remember it. In my dreams, the tears went up his cheeks and backs into his eyes” (Foer 2005, 284). The grandmother reveals that the moment she had shared with her father before he dies in the Dresden firebombing occurs so often in her dreams.

The grandmother’s traumatic memory of this horrifying past event manifests itself again in the form of hallucinations as well: “remember when we went skating a few months ago and I turned around, because I told you that watching people skate gave me a headache? I saw rows of bodies under the ice” (Foer 2005, 209). This proves that Oskar’s grandmother is a melancholic character. The grandmother’s fears are not as greater as Oskar’s; however she does not want to live her trauma alone. She pretends that she is blind in order to grab her husband’s attention. Moreover, she has even begged him not to leave her although she knows he does not love her and he will never do, but the fear of isolation drives her to step

on her ego. It is quite interesting to note that in his essay “The Uncanny,” Freud refers to the connection between the uncanny and the double, emphasizing that the double is the reflection of unwanted elements that the traumatized individual strives to hide. He asserts that “since the uncanny effect of a double also belongs to this same group it is interesting to observe what the effect is of meeting one’s own image unbidden and unexpected” (1919, 247).

Using Freud’s words, one notes that the Grandmother is another example in the novel of the self and the double. To some point, she appears more normal and healthier compared to the other characters. But through the narration of Oskar about her attendance to his play in school, it is noticeable that she also suffers from this duality of the self. In other words, the grandmother experiences a split between her body and mind, and she completely loses control over body. Her corporeal behaviors are an ample evidence of the phenomenon of the foreign body or the double that Freud referred to in his works. Importantly, self-harm is seen as a way through which traumatized subjects unconsciously project their traumas. In Foer’s novel, the grandmother too is not aware that she has been hurting herself: “I looked at my arm. It was bleeding through my shirt. Had I fallen and not noticed? Had I been scratching it? That was when I knew that I knew” (Foer 2005, 205). However, she does not hurt herself unconsciously out of feeling guilty, but because she is shocked that her son is in one of the targeted buildings during the 9/11 attacks.

The Healing Process in Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

There are several ways that can help people to get rid of trauma, but the effectiveness of such ways depends on the traumatized subject’s will of healing. To cope with trauma means to realize one’s issue and to accept the traumatic event. Healing from trauma goes hand in hand with Freud’s concepts of melancholia and mourning as it was highlighted in Herman’s book *Trauma and Recovery*. To be healed means to move from being a melancholic into a mourner, adding that the failure to “complete the normal process of grieving perpetuates the traumatic reaction” (Herman 1992, 69). In the novel, Foer manifests the process of recovery through his three main characters; providing the reader with an interesting healing story. On this basis, this part analyzes the process of healing that takes place in the three characters’ lives through different elements such as writing, interacting, and narrating.

Writing as a Medium of Healing from Trauma

One way that helps to cope with and to heal from trauma is to turn those traumatic events into written narratives. Writing helps the patient to come to terms with traumatic events, which is an essential step in working through trauma. The traumatized subject needs to find a solution to his isolation. Sharing his traumatic experience will bring a feeling of relief and comfort. From a psychoanalytic perspective, turning the traumatic memory into words is not an easy step, but once one succeeds in it, the feeling of repression will disappear. By doing so, the subjects are fighting their fears, expressing their anger and grief; he/ she is moving those memories from the unconscious to the conscious. This idea is clearly highlighted in Lacapra’s use of the concepts of “acting out” and “working through” of trauma. Lacapra draws on Freud’s concepts of melancholia and mourning to deal with how trauma can be healed.

“I Just Stopped Being Able to Express the Want:” Trauma and Body Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

Melancholia is a state of mind where the person finds himself repetitively living the traumatic event, at the same time he is acting that past out in a post-traumatic present. That is to say the traumatized subject is imploded by the past, present, and future and cannot differentiate between them as Judith Herman explains it under her concept of “Double think”. Acting out prevents the victims from expressing their feelings: “Acting out disables trauma survivors to express what they feel and forces them to express what they cannot feel” (Lacabra 2001, 42). Turning the horrible experience into traumatic narratives is impossible for a melancholic individual. The main reason for the inability of sharing pain with others is the failure of moving on with life. For a trauma victim, moving on or forgetting is a betrayal to the ones who were lost in the event. The feeling of guilt and the failure of expressing and narrating trauma breaks the bridge into the way out from melancholia. Melancholies semi-consciously resist this conversion because of their eagerness to relive the past. Generally, acting out or melancholia is a state where the traumatized subject unconsciously relives the traumatic event, and semi-consciously refuses to narrate it. This latter is the reason behind the impossibility of coping with trauma.

However, if the traumatized subjects can turn those events into narratives, they will immediately lead them to another phase where surviving and coping with trauma is possible. This phase is referred to “Mourning” by Freud, and “working through” according to Lacabra. Working through trauma means coming to terms with the traumatic past, and to be able to distinguish between the past, present, and future. In this phase, the mourners are obliged to turn their silence into a voice, and to face their trauma. The working through can be shaped in the form of mourning which means the traumatized subjects express their grief and unleash pressed feelings. What really boosts the process of mourning is storytelling. While the first occurs repetitively, the second is not.

The first attempt of healing in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* occurs through writing; turning the traumatic experience into written words is the first step in unfolding the repression of the three characters. The power of letters is highlighted in Louise De Salvo’s book *Writing as a Way of Healing* (2000), in which she insists on the importance of writing in facing and understanding trauma. In this regard, she maintains: “what we believed happened to us, shifts and changes, it is not that we use writing to deny what we have experienced. Rather, we use it to shift our perspectives” (11). Right after the 9/11 attacks, Oskar feels an urge to write. In this regard, he says: “a few weeks after the worst day, I started writing lots of letters. I do not know why, but it was one of the only things that made my boots lighter” (Foer 2005, 21). Oskar always uses the expression “heavy boots” whenever he feels insecure. Writing is a way that makes those boots lighter; it brings a sort of relief and comfort to his heart. However, the letters he writes have been sent to famous scientists like Stephen Hawking who probably will never read or reply to those letters. For Oskar, the aim of writing is not to be heard but to confess the truth to his inner self. As De Salvo puts it: “through writing, we revisit our past, and review and revise it” (2005, 11). It is mentioned earlier Oskar hurts his body whenever his boots are heavy. To some extent, writing prevents him from putting those bruises on his body.

The grandmother is a tricky character. At first, the reader thinks that she copes with her trauma and works through it. She starts to type her story on the typewriter that her husband bought her; she finds a

way to make her life easier and better. However, later on, the reader comes to know that she was not writing, but she pretends to be typing by hitting the space bar constantly for hours. She wants to convince her husband that she is busy with something she loves. Surprisingly, her husband is the one who suggests for her to write. Even though Thomas does not consider such a solution for his own case, he knows that the end of suffering is through expressing it. The grandmother deludes him into thinking that she is following his suggestion; she believes that writing with no attentive audience is a useless act. She knows that Thomas will never seek to read her writings. Unlike the other two characters, the grandmother looks for a listener to her story, and that is why, she does not hesitate to write to Oskar her story of survival from the Dresden air raids: “dear Oskar, I am writing this to you from the airport. I have so much to say to you. I want to begin at the beginning because that is what you deserve. I want to tell you everything, without leaving out a single detail” (Foer 2005, 73). In this vein, letters are the medium through which the grandmother needs to speak out her trauma, and Oskar is her only listener.

Although Thomas’s aphasia has prevented him from speaking, he is aware that he needs to share his own trauma. Accordingly, he states: “what am I going to do, I need more room, I have things I need to say, my words are pushing at the walls of paper’s edge” (Foer 2005, 252). Writing letters has an important role in his process of healing from his psychic wounds. He uses writing as a communication means with others. Therefore, we can consider him as a mourner who is working through his trauma. After taking the decision of leaving his pregnant wife, Thomas starts sending many letters to his son, in which he talks about everything he was once unable to tell due to his aphasia. He attempts to explain every single detail from the day he met Anna and the attacks he had survived to the day he abandoned his son: “I walked over an old man, I walked over children, everyone was losing everyone, the bombs were like a waterfall, run through the streets, from cellar to cellar, and saw terrible things; legs and necks” (Foer 2005, 191). For Thomas, writing his story is a fruitful step in the process of healing. Before he decides to write, he has been unable to understand or identify his trauma. Admitting that he is abnormal and that the way he is treating himself and his surroundings is unfair. Through those letters, Thomas engages in a conversation between his inside and outside in which he invokes a fight between his conscious and unconscious mind. In this vein, Marian M. Mc Curdy explains that this struggle leads trauma victim to: “place his trauma incident in his consciousness to create a sense of control over those memories” (Mc Curdy 2007, 92).

Healing through Interaction

Since trauma involves disempowerment and disconnection from others, healing necessarily is based upon social interactions. Herman indicates that: “recovery is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections, recovery can take place only within the context of relationships, it cannot occur in isolation” (1992, 133). To clarify the positive effect of social connections, Herman adds that the traumatized subject “Re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy [...] identity and intimacy” to form relationships with others (1992, 133). The discovery and development of such

“I Just Stopped Being Able to Express the Want:” Trauma and Body Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer’s
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005)

relationships in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* starts with Oskar’s searching journey. Inside his father’s closet, Oskar finds a key in an envelope named “Black”; he believes that his father has intentionally put the key there so that he can find it. This moment marks the beginning of his long search journey for seeking the importance of that key. He literally goes to meet every person named Black in New York City. What he experiences throughout this journey is that making people happy will make his boots lighter: “because I wanted to make him crack up because if I could make him crack up, my boots could be little lighter.” (Foer 2005, 16). Whenever he meets a new person, he asks about his life before asking about the key. He spends much time listening to their troubles and forgets about his mission: “I made a decision that I would not ask her about the key, because I wanted her to believe that we had come to see her museum” (Foer 2005, 221).

At first, Oskar believes that the key is his main concern, and that people are only a tool to accomplish his mission. However, with the passage of time, Oskar becomes glad to know different people even if they do not offer him help: “it is too bad you did not know anything about the key, but it was still nice to meet you” (Foer 2005, 180). This interaction with others makes him realize that he is not the sole sufferer and that there are worse cases than his. Therefore, this experience transforms him into a thoughtful and generous person: “I felt so deeply for this person [...] I wanted to give him the money that the agency had given me. I did not need to tell him my story, but I needed to listen to him. I wanted to protect him” (Foer 2005, 78). Out of all the people he has met, his neighbor is the one who has left an unforgettable impact on him. The father’s departure has brought sadness to Oskar’s life, but it has also brought a sort of happiness, that is the happiness of taking care and sympathizing with others. Oskar tries to make his old neighbor happy by giving him a gift: “but I could not keep my happiness in, and before he got the paper off the box I said “it is a necklace I made for you with compass pendent so you can know where you are in relation to bed”” (Foer 2005, 174).

Moreover, Abe Black has convinced Oskar to try to ride a roller coaster, which was one of his greatest fears: “Obviously I am incredibly panicky about roller coasters, but Abe convinced me to ride one with him (Foer 2005, 130). It is clear that this journey is very helpful to Oskar since it provides him with the support he needs to overcome many obstacles and fears. The communication with his surroundings pushes him to a further step in healing, which is seeking a professional help as it is evident in the following passage: “I had to go to Dr. Fein. I did not understand why I needed help, because it seemed to me that you should wear heavy boots when your father dies, and if you are not wearing heavy boots, then you need help” (Foer 2005 182). The more Oskar interacts with others, the more he reveals about his secrets. The first time he begins to share his emotions is with his therapist; the conversation encourages him to feel free to express whatever he wants. Oskar feels comfortable when he speaks about his overlapping emotions. He becomes more knowledgeable about his situation and, thus, he can identify his feelings. Moreover, the session with his therapist helped Oskar uncover his deepest thoughts and fears “I end up crying a lot, usually in private. It is extremely hard for me to go to school. I also cannot sleep over friends’ apartments, because I get panicky about being away from mom. I am not very good with people” (Foer 2005, 182).

Like Oskar, the grandfather also reveals that he becomes joyful whenever he watches happy people: “I like to see people reunited, maybe that is a silly thing, but what can I say I like to see people running into each other” (Foer 2005, 107). Furthermore, after long years of loneliness, he develops a solid relationship with his grandson; he helps him in his search and listens to his traumatic story. In the grandmother’s case, right from the beginning, the grandmother sought to work through her trauma. She wants to start a new life with her husband and to mourn her trauma with others. That is why she wishes to be fluent in English. Unfortunately, her husband leaves her and smashes her hopes. Accordingly, she is stuck between two processes, (i.e) melancholia and that of mourning. However, after the 9/11 attacks, her husband returns and, with his return, those hopes are back again.

Conclusion

Trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is projected in a corporeal form. The study reveals that the three characters are trapped in a state of unconsciousness where they lose the sense of life and connection with the world. Not only do the characters suffer from melancholic symptoms such as horrendous flashbacks, nightmares and hallucinations, but they also suffer from constant intentional and unintentional attempts of self-harm. The study equally highlights that trauma was responsible for the characters’ infection with anxiety, loss of language and trauma repression. It explores that trauma is also the reason behind the creation of the foreign body and the split of the characters. These corporeal traumatic obstacles stand against the desire to overcome trauma. On this basis, the study shows that Foer’s characters are a fertile ground for trauma studies and for the investigation of its corporeality. Their trauma manifestation proves that traumatic events can be projected in a bodily form. The study also proves that healing from trauma, as it was shown in this studied fictional work, is not impossible when the trauma victim follows the right path to achieve it.

"لقد توقفت للتو عن أن أكون قادراً على التعبير:" الصدمة و سرد الجسد في رواية جوناثان سافران فوير (بصوت
عال للغاية و قريب بشكل لا يصدق 2005)

سمية بوعصيدة، إكرام الشهب
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، جامعة 20 أوت 1955 - سكيكدة، الجزائر

إيمان بلحولة
باحث مستقل

الملخص

تهدف الدراسة إلى النظر عن كثب في وظيفة الجسد في تجسيد الصدمة عندما تفشل اللغة في التعبير عن الأحداث الصادمة السابقة في رواية جوناثان سافران فوير (بصوت عال للغاية و قريب بشكل لا يصدق 2005). من خلال تسليط الدراسة الضوء على العلاقة بين الجسدية والصدمة، وتبحث الدراسة على وجه التحديد كيف تعود صدمات شخصيات فوير من خلال شروخ في وعيهم على شكل ردود فعل جسدية غير واعية وكأبة، وخوف، وانفصال عن الذات أو ما يسميه علماء النفس " الازدواج النفسي." وتسعى الدراسة إلى إظهار كيف تتعافى شخصيات فوير من نكرياتهم المؤلمة السابقة فيما يتعلق باللغة. من أجل دراسة دور الجسدية في التعبير عن الأحداث الصادمة السابقة للشخصيات، وإمكانية الشفاء من هذه الجروح النفسية، تعتمد الدراسة على أهم نظريات الصدمة بما في ذلك تركيز سيغموند فرويد المجازي على دور الجسدية في التعبير عن الصدمة، ومساهمة كاثي كاروث في استكشاف كيفية التعبير عن الصدمة عبر المظاهر الجسدية. من خلال تحليل نصي لرواية فوير، وتُظهر الدراسة أن المظاهر الجسدية اللاواعية للشخصيات لقلقهم وجروحهم الجسدية والنفسية هي جزء من عملية الشفاء التي تحدث بصورة خاصة من خلال الكتابة والتفاعل ورواية أحداثهم الصادمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جوناثان سافران فوير، بصوت عال للغاية وقريب بشكل لا يصدق، جسدية الصدمة، إيذاء النفس، وعملية الشفاء.

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