



A Psychological Reading of Jonathan Safran Foer's
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

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Abstract

*This article deals with the psychoanalytic analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The novel tackles the issue of the 9/11 attacks and the aftermath of this latter on people who survived it or those who had lost their relatives in the incident. The article argues that the main characters represented by Oskar, his grandfather and grandmother suffer from trauma and melancholia. The psychological analysis in the article is based on the studies and experimentations of Sigmund Freud. The article tries to illustrate the necessity of expressing one's thoughts and feelings as a cure against mental illnesses, in this case, trauma and melancholia.*

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1. Introduction

What happened on 9/11/2001 was a shock for the world as a whole from various perspectives. Looking at the event from a political angle, Terry Nadin and Daniel Sherman state that "buildings and cities have long been destroyed in the guise of saving civilizations from the power of the barbarians who constructed them" (2006, 15). In fact, analysing the 9/11 event from a historical or a political point of view is difficult. Rather, such an event has been often studied from a psychological perspective which helped realize the reactions and the behaviours of the American people especially those who survived the event.

From an artistic and precisely literary angle, the 9/11 event and its aftermath do remarkably show off in the works of different artists and especially authors. Indeed, the literature that appeared after 9/11 becomes known as the 9/11 literature and the novels that belong to such a category deal with characters who survived the event and try to analyse their thoughts, feelings and behaviors or in other words, the horror and the trauma caused by the 9/11 attacks.

One of the important novels that deal with the 9/11 attacks and its traumatic aftermath is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Foer was born in 1977 in Washington DC (Learning, 2017, 5). He published his second novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in 2005 (2017, 6). In this paper, the researcher will be concerned with revealing or ensuring the fact that the protagonist Oskar suffers from trauma and that he along with his grandmother and grandfather experience a form of melancholia the cure of which is through expressing the feelings and ideas whether by writing, speaking or eventually dreaming

2. Trauma

According to Freud, a traumatic experience is very unseen and it has a painful and menacing impact. The person's unconsciousness tends to forget or ignore the traumatic experience and thus this latter will be inexperienced or differently said: lost. Hence, the trauma itself cannot be analysed instead it reflects itself as a repetition of the traumatic event in dreams and thoughts and through fragmented memories. To recover from the trauma, according to Freud, one should talk (Roazen, 2002, 159). In psychoanalysis, when the patient talks about his dreams, thoughts and fantasies, the therapist tries to decipher the struggle that is hidden under the symptoms and for Freud, dreams are part of the talking cure (2002, 160).

Oskar Shell is a nine years old child who lost his father during the 9/11 attacks on the world trade centres. He is convinced that his father had left a message for him somewhere in town. Oskar finds a key in his father's things and believes that he needs to search for the lock matching this key. Doing so, Oskar thinks that he can decipher his father's last message. His journey helps him pass his feeling of grief and set aside his traumatic experience.

2.1. Oskar as a Traumatic Child

Oskar is a very complex character. He is nine years old and too smart for his age. He is introduced to the reader through the title of the first chapter What The ?. When reading the title, the reader tends to add a word or two to complete the meaning of the sentence which will probably carry a bad meaning. Through reading the chapter, the reader comes to the fact that this sentence is frequently in Oskar's mind. He has a messed-up mind. He is a boy who has lost his father in the 9/11 attacks and he tries not to think about this fact by creating unrealistic inventions. I could invent [...] a set of kettles that sings the chorus of "Yellow Submarine" which is a song by the Beatles, who

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I love, because entomology is one of my raisons d'être, which is a French expression that I know" (2005, 12).

In fact, Oskar is a very intelligent child. Although, his style of talking is of a child, yet his intelligence is one of the important characteristics in his personality. Indeed, it is obvious that trauma has affected his state of mind. It seems that no one of his surroundings is aware of what he is talking about. There is no doubt that the death of his father has filled him with a sense of bitterness and makes him think in a way older than his age.

When he was taking a Jujitsu class once, Oskar told his counterpart that he is not going to attack him because he is "pacifist". Such a term is probably not used or understood by kids who are his age. However, his training reflects his indifference and laziness. Although, he wants to know everything about Jujitsu, it is not a real motivation for him anymore: "I want to know everything, I told him, but that isn't true anymore either." (2005, 2) Oskar is no more curious about anything, especially after the death of his father. This is one of the trauma symptoms known as lethargy :

Lethargy refers to a sense of fatigue and a lack of both mental and physical energy and motivation. A person with lethargy may feel unmotivated or have an indifferent attitude toward their daily activities. They may feel as though they are walking around in a haze or constant state of brain fog and do not have the energy to complete their normal tasks. (Sampson, 2020)

2.2. Oskar's Heavy Boots

The pre-traumatic joyful child is now suffering from a confused state of mind to which he refers more than 15 times in the novel as being in "heavy boots" which is the title of a whole chapter. Oskar tends to use this term when he finds himself in a state of grief or fear, mainly: "got incredibly heavy boots about how relatively insignificant life is" (2005, 86). "My boots were so heavy that I was glad there was a column underneath us" (2005, 163).

Another aspect of trauma is Oskar's fear that the death of his father will be dealt with as something simple and normal. He knows that his father is one of many people who passed away in the attacks of 9/11 but for him, Thomas' death is something very unique and special. Moreover, for Oskar, it is quite normal for any human being to feel sad after the death of his/her father, thus he is not able to understand why he should attend therapy sessions: "I didn't understand why I needed help, because it seemed to me that you should wear heavy boots when your dad dies, and if you aren't wearing heavy boots, then you need help"(2005, 200).

Oskar feels that it is wrong to feel any better. Even after years from the traumatic event, he thinks that he must mourn his father and that people who don't, are abnormal to him. If he stops mourning his father, he will feel guilty for not being honest in loving him. Searching for the key he thinks his father left, Oskar believes that he will solve the mystery of his father's death. He looked

for the lock to end his struggle with trauma; however, when he finds out that the key has nothing to do with such a case, he was heavily disappointed: "I didn't know what to say. I found it and now I can stop looking? I found it and it had nothing to do with Dad? I found it and now. I'll wear heavy boots for the rest of my life?" (2005, 302).

Oskar is an isolated character who keeps thinking repeatedly about the traumatic event which, as a result, enforces his traumatic suffering. According to Freud, people who suffer from trauma suffers also from the repetition of the traumatic event (1920, 21): "There were four more messages from him [...] I listened to them, and listened to them again, and then before I had no time to figure out what to do, or even what to think or feel, the phone started ringing. It was 10:22:27. I looked at the caller ID and saw it was him" (2005, 15).

At the key moment, repetition is also there. Oskar listens to his father's messages on the answering machine repeatedly because he does not know how to deal with the situation. Being painfully confused, he tries to hide the answering machine and buys another exact model so that, his mother will not listen to the calls and tell the others. Oskar's feeling of guilt also plays an important role, in his traumatic situation. Without listening to Thomas' messages, Oskar will feel more confused about his father's death. Thus, it is these calls along with the feeling of guilt that makes the death of Thomas Schell lives deep in the heart of Oskar; however, they are also so terrified that the boy becomes badly traumatized. Oskar is indeed afraid of certain things:

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, fierworks, 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 buildings, turbans. (2005, 36)

It is evident that the boy's fear comes to life after the "worst day" (2005, 12). Oskar feels afraid when he sees "Arab people", bags "without owners" airplanes...etc. however, he feels also afraid of things which are not related to 9/11 like "shoes", "knots" and "germs"(2005, 36). This is due to the fact of having a confused and traumatized mind. Oskar comes even to question his mental state:

It was worst at night. I started inventing things, and then I couldn't stop, like beavers, which I know about. People think they cut down trees so they can build dams, but in reality it's because their teeth never stop growing, and if they didn't constantly file them through by cutting through all of those trees, their teeth would start to grow into their own faces, which would kill them. That's how my brain was. (2005, 46)

It seems that Oskar's inventions are the thing that gets him far from insanity.

3. An Unreliable Narration:

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Oskar is the narrator of the novel; however, suffering from trauma makes his narration unreliable. It seems that Foer gives Oskar the role of a narrator to focus on the idea of trauma in the novel. According to certain critics, Oskar does not fit in the role of the narrator of a novel which depicts one of the most important issues in the world. For Elizabeth Siegel: “[i]t was especially the voice of Oskar [...] that irritated reviewers and allegedly precluded a thorough examination of the effects of trauma and international political crisis” (2005, 1).

However, Oskar's ideas and analyses are the way how his traumatized mind perceives the world and more precisely the 9/11 event. Thus, his attitude could not be considered a political or a philosophical depiction of 9/11. It is true that the list of his terrifying things includes "Arab people" and "mustaches"; however, whether this would be considered as a racist point of view or as an 'us' versus 'them' issue is totally a different story. In fact, Foer does not give his own opinion about the novel, instead he tries to depict the aftermath of such an event and especially its traumatic one on people who witnessed the 9/11 attacks in a way or another. Toward the end of the novel, Oskar tries to think about what he would have done if he was in his father's situation.

In fact, Oskar struggles to be cured of trauma without help. He does not like to talk about his problem. Yet, such a matter seems to be contradictory. At the time that Oskar does not talk about his problem to his mother or grandmother, he prefers to open his heart and express his grief to a stranger who turns out to be his grandfather. The title of the novel itself is a comment on this fact. It seems that Oskar's style of talking is extremely loud and incredibly close. At the time that Oskar thinks that he is expressing loudly his ideas, it becomes clear later that this is only happening in his mind. This would be seen in one of the novel's passages when Oskar was playing the role of Yorrik in a school play of Hamlet. He imagines that he is breaking the head of a boy who used to tease him in school. However after a while, the entire scene turns out to be in the mind of Oskar:

The only thing that makes any sense right then is my smashing Jimmy Snyder's face. His blood.[...] I keep smashing the skull against his skull, which is also Ron 's skull (for letting mom get on with life) and mom 's (for getting on with life) and dad's skull (for dying) and grandma 's skull, (for embarrassing me so much) and Dr. Fein's skull (for asking if any good could come out of dad's death) and the skulls of everyone else. I know.[...] .It would have been great. (2005, 146-147)

It is the first time that Oskar expresses his anger openly yet, all appear to be only in his imagination. Being aggressive either physically or emotionally is an idea that never crossed Oskar's mind. Rather, he refers, most of the time, to his need of hurting himself "Even though I knew I shouldn't, I gave myself a bruise" (2005, 37). Oskar chooses to hurt himself physically as a means to get rid of his psychological pain. It seems that he tends to punish himself for a pang of certain guilt he feels deep in his mind. His bruises are on the other side a vivid proof that he needs immediate help. But in his therapy sessions, he never speaks openly about his needs or desires.

4. Writing as a Remedy:

To cope with his traumatic situation, Oskar chooses to write. According to Mark Bracher: “those subjects who had written about their thoughts and feelings about *traumatic* experiences evidenced significant improvement in immune function compared with controls” (1999, 149). Oskar feels an urgent need of writing in his journal about what is going on in his mind. But, he tends repeatedly to correct himself depending on his emotional state. This journal speaks loudly about Oskar’s situation. He is living a conflict in which he knows neither how to interact nor how must he explain his interaction. Oskar puts down his feelings in this way

Mediocre

Optimistic but realistic

[...] Optimistic but realistic

Extremely depressed

[...] Extremely depressed

Incredibly alone (2005, 170-171)

When finding, by the end of the novel that his mother knows about his journal, Oskar starts to feel free from his traumatic situation. "The act of talking can change the ways we think and feel about traumatic events and about ourselves" (Pennebaker, 1997, 27). Indeed, after opening his heart to his mother, Oskar starts to get stronger and more familiar with those whom he has been estranged from because of trauma. The wish of Oskar, at the end of the novel, to have time back so that he and his family "would have been safe" (2005, 326), is not a wish for the 9/11 attacks not to happen especially from a political perspective. Oskar wishes that his father is not dead. He wishes to get rid of his share of the collective memory which forces him into trauma. "Talking about trauma" and consequently sharing it "can result in other benefits such as advice, attention, sympathy, financial assistance and a way of excusing individuals from carrying out their normal responsibilities". (Pennebaker, 1997, 27). Freud states that images, gestures, slogans ...etc enable people to share their traumatic events with others (Roazen, 2002, 166).

The novel’s form plays an important role in understanding the traumatic experience of the characters. The novel contains pictures, blank pages, index cards, corrections in red ink...etc and it is divided into Oskar’s quest, Thomas Sr’s letters and Grandmother’s letters.

5. Melancholia

In addition to trauma, the novel deals with the Freudian notion of melancholia. For Freud, melancholia is the subconscious repression of the traumatized event (Person, 2009, 1). Thus the person will not be able to move forward instead he will stick to the traumatic past (2009, 1). Melancholia could be, noticeably, found in the novel. In fact, all the characters of the novel seem to suffer from melancholia. Thomas Sr is not able to speak after his girlfriend’s death in the Dresden bombings, Grandma is suffering from a painful feeling of guilt and detachment and the protagonist Oskar tries desperately to feel protected by finding a meaning in his father’s death and he finds such protection in his world of fantasy where he invents taxis, risk-free, elevators...etc. However, all the

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characters are not able to communicate and thus to realize their traumatic experiences. This appears in Thomas Sr's notebook and tattooed hands, in Grandmother's ribbonless typewriter, in the "something" and "nothing" places found in their apartment and in the bracelet that Oskar gave to his mother as a translation of his father's last message. In fact, the characters could only express their traumas in physical ways. Grandmother, for instance, realizes that her son is dead only after seeing the blood through her shirt "That was when I knew that I knew" (2005, 224).

The concept of melancholia is related to memory. It is the act of repressing the traumatic event deep in the mind (person, 2009, 2). At the same time that Oskar is suffering a trauma caused by the death of his father; his grandfather and grandmother are already suffering from other old traumatic experiences. Although they survived the Dresden bombing, they carry deep in their minds a sense of guilt because they are the only persons who survived the event. The 9/11 attacks cost them their son and thus they suffer from a new trauma or put differently, they are re-traumatized.

Thomas Shell Sr, the grandfather, lost his girlfriend Anna during the Dresden bombing. Being very delighted that she was pregnant, he did not think seriously about the air raid alarm:

Before I left, she said, 'Please be over joyed [sic].' I told her I was, of course, I was, I kissed her, I kissed her stomach, that was the last time I saw her. At 9.30 that night, the airraid sirens sounded, everyone went to the shelters, but no one hurried, we were use [sic] to the alarms, we assumed they were false, why would anyone want to bomb Dresden? (2005, 210)

Surviving the air raid, Thomas Sr is suffering from a heavyweight of guilt. He feels that Anna's death is his responsibility. Thus escaping death after having an encounter with it, and being able to manage such an encounter and escape from it while others did not, are the main reasons for Thomas Sr's trauma:

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. (2005, 132-133)

In fact, after the death of Anna, Thomas Sr's self esteem goes through a severe crisis. He feels that he is no more worthy of living in the present yet he can't as well forget the past. The solution to this would be 'the acceptance'. Accepting the traumatic experience and dealing with it as something that would inevitably happen will help the traumatic person recover (Trunkey and Lewis, 1986, 44).

Thomas can't talk about his experience because he suffers from aphasia or the loss of speech. Indeed, Thomas is unwilling to share his experience with others and, in fact, his aphasia goes hand

in hand with Anna's death. Thomas' refusal of talking embodies under the term Melancholia in which the traumatic victim tries to hide what happened and sticks to the past (Person, 2009, 22). Thomas is aware of the fact that he can't let go of the past and for him this is something he failed and will always fail to do:

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, 17)

When meeting Mrs. Shell at first, the reader will think that she is doing much better than her husband. She can talk and she can cope with her past and with the fact that Thomas Sr abandoned her. At first, it seems that Mrs. Shell tries to write her experience which will help her recover from her traumatic past. However, it is a real shock for the reader to find out later on, that Mrs. Shell is not writing, instead she is pretending it as she hits repeatedly the space bar.

Mrs. Shell is like Thomas Sr torn between death and life. She was planning to commit suicide. However, when Thomas Sr told her to come back, she returned to him because: "his attention filled the whole in the middle of her» and this was a temporary reason for her to live (2005, 83). Nevertheless, a couple of days after the worst day, Oskar saw his grandmother carrying a heavy and big rock. He felt that there was something wrong with that rock since, "she never gave that one to [him] and she never mentioned it" (2005, 104).

Grandma is like her husband loaded with feelings of guilt. She had the habit of collecting letters when she was a girl and she thought that it is those letters that caused her home to be burned "brightly "(2005, 83). In fact, grandmother suffers as well from noticeably low self-esteem and a feeling of unworthiness. When she knew that her son was in the restaurant Windows on the World when the planes hit, she says:

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. (2005, 231)

Grandmother does not really prefer silence like Thomas Sr, instead, she feels that she wants to share her story with others. She wants to tell people about the Dresden bombing and how it feels like to lose loved ones and that is why she writes letters to her grandson. She seems to accept her

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past. When she felt that Thomas Sr was at the point of abandoning her, she asked him why and he told her that he did not know how to live. She admits that it is the same for her; however, she was trying (2005, 181).

In fact, as a traumatized person, Mrs. Shell starts to lose her emotional attachment which makes her unable to go on. Laziness and passivity are symptoms of trauma (McCaughey, 2010, 51) and that's what is happening to Mrs. Shell. But the active side of trauma takes place in her dreams:

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. (2005, 104)

Her suffering from Melancholia exposes itself in her attempt to hurt herself especially after the attacks of 9/11 which awakened her early sense of Melancholia caused by the Dresden bombing. Oskar, also, used to hurt himself.

Indeed, Foer creates a clear distinction between Oskar and Hamlet. In the school play, Oskar plays the role of Yorrik the jester who is the extreme contrast to Hamlet the melancholic thinker. It is evident, as it was early mentioned, that Oskar feels an urging need to invent. He uses his intellect or art to protect him from all that could cause him pain. He immediately refuges to his shield whenever being attacked and thus it is like a weapon against Melancholia.

6. Conclusion

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is mainly a novel about the psychological aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The protagonist Oskar Shell is suffering from trauma caused by the death of his father. Throughout the novel, Oskar chooses to hide under the bed or in the wardrobes. This attitude of hiding reflects the fact that he is a melancholic person. However, as opposed to his grandfather, Oskar wants to share his traumatic experience so maybe he will be cured of melancholia

On the other hand, Thomas Sr chooses to suffer in silence. He experiences two traumas along with his wife, Mrs. Shell. This latter is, as well, suffering from a deep sense of pain, guilt and sorrow which she does not know how to get rid of. The novel tackles the idea of sharing the pain of the traumatic events with people and helping those who cannot by calling them out to speak, write and express all the feelings they suffer from.

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