



CHILDREN'S TRAUMA AND COPING STRATEGIES IN POST-9/11 AMERICAN NOVELS

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Abstract:

This paper explores the depiction of children's trauma in post-9/11 novels. It also investigates the strategies that children adopt to cope with their trauma. Three American novels are selected, namely, John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), and Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011). The theoretical concept of psychological trauma is applied to analyze the texts to examine how the tragedy of 9/11 affects the children in these works. In addition, Valerie Dripchak's understanding of Posttraumatic Play (PTP) is utilized for exploring the children's coping strategies with their traumatic experiences. The analysis revealed that the children in *Terrorist* and *Falling Man* act out their trauma through some games or playing activities that repeat their trauma and detach them from healing. Although some children act out their trauma in *The Submission*, the novel shows that children are able to work through their trauma and recover from it by adopting positive playing activities, including drawings.

Keywords: 9/11 attacks, trauma, children, negative game, positive game

1. Introduction

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in the United States have become remarkable events in the country's history. Many American poets, short story writers, and novelists published works that commemorate the events in the wake of the attacks. A number of these works shed light on the aftermath of that day, including the victims' traumatic experience. This paper will explore how children's trauma is depicted in post-9/11 novels. It will also examine the strategies that children adopt to cope with their trauma. To do so, three novels are selected, namely, John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), and Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011).

Updike's novel revolves around how Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, an 18-year-old American schoolboy, is radicalized after 9/11. The story addresses several issues, including terrorism, racism, and identity. DeLillo's text explores the World Trade Centre (WTC) attacks traumatize

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Keith Neudecker, a thirty-nine-year-old lawyer, who survives the attacks. It also shed light on how his personal and social life is severely affected by his trauma. Waldman's story is about a Muslim-American architect, Mohammad Khan, who wins an anonymous competition to design a 9/11 memorial in New York City. The winner's cultural background divides the city and the country into supporters and opponents of him. The novel explores several themes, including identity, politics, racism, and trauma, on a national scale.

Although the fictional characters in these works do not have a real psyche to be psychoanalyzed, Tyson clarifies that "[w]hen we psychoanalyze literary characters, we are not suggesting that they are real people but that they represent the psychological experience of human beings in general" (Tyson, 2015, p. 34). The paper will analyze each novel first and then provides a brief conclusion summarizing the main findings. However, first, it will start by providing a brief presentation of the theoretical term, trauma.

2. Conceptual Framework

Luckhurst defines trauma as a psychosomatic illness that affects "those [who] confronted with an experience involving "actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a physical threat to the physical integrity of the self" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 1). This illness is described by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 1). For individuals to be diagnosed with PTSD, specific symptoms have to be identified, including avoiding remembering the traumatic events, losing the ability to control emotions, and re-experiencing the traumatic event through flashbacks or dreams. Bond and Carps explain that "the traumatic memories are repressed as they are formed, leaving them unavailable to conscious recall; subsequently, they recur in various displaced ways, as hallucinations, flashbacks, or nightmares" (Bond & Carps, 2020, p. 4). Thus, the remembering of the traumatizing events comes in a distorted form of what has happened.

One of the critical aspects of trauma is that the traumatized person can transmit his/her trauma to other people even if they do not experience the traumatic event. Luckhurst affirms that trauma "leaks [...] between patients, between patients and doctors, and between victims and their listeners or viewers who commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy, even to the extent of claiming secondary victimhood" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 3). In this sense, trauma is a contagious disease that can be passed from one person to another. According to Luckhurst's explanation, the traumatic experience can be considered (primary trauma) the person who experiences the traumatized event by him/herself and (secondary trauma) the person who listens, watches, or reads the traumatic experience. In this sense, the traumatic experience can be transmitted through personal stories (oral or written), through mass media (TV, Internet, newspapers, or radio), or photos and pictures. Thus, trauma can infect individuals (individual trauma) or a group of people (collective trauma) (Luckhurst, 2008). Moreover, Bond and Craps contend that real traumatizing event can be mediated via fictional stories; "many trauma novels and films not only depict traumatizing events but can also embody and reproduce the trauma for the reader or viewer through their form of narration" (Bond & Craps, 2020, p. 57).

Acting-out and working-through are two strategies that a traumatized person adopts to react to his/her trauma. Acting-out means that the individuals repeat the traumatizing event and

regenerate the past and live within it “*as if it [is] fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription*” (Bond & Craps, 2020, p.78). Sigmund Freud terms such attitudes as *Melancholia* in which the mind returns over and over to the terrifying event. Replaying the memory in this way makes it difficult for the traumatized person to get the terrifying memories out of his/her head. On the other hand, working-through implies that the traumatized person stands in critical distance from the traumatic experience “*and re-contextualize[es] them in ways that permit a re-engagement with ongoing concerns and future possibilities*” (Bond & Craps, 2020, p. 78). In this sense, working-through helps the traumatized person attain resolution and, eventually, recover from the traumatic experience. Freud terms this process as *Mourning* in which the traumatized person mourn the past but can abandon his/her attachment to it and look to the future (Bond & Craps, 2020).

Although children, like adults, might react to their trauma by acting-out or working-through it, they are incapable of expressing their trauma through words. Instead, they reenact the traumatic event through play. Dripchak explains that Post-Traumatic Play (PTP) “*is the compulsive repetition of the trauma or trauma-related themes in play [by] using specific play materials*” (Dripchak, 2007, p. 126). Dripchak categorizes the PTP into two types: a positive type and a negative type. In both types, the children reenact their trauma; however, in the positive type, “*the child is able to modify the negative components of the trauma [...] and gain mastery over experience*” (Dripchak, 2007, p. 126). Such mastery gives the children a sense of controlling their imaginary world and helps them learn and express feelings (Dripchak, 2007). The children in the negative type fail to adjust the negative elements of the traumatic memory. In other words, they are unable to control their fictional world because the game or playing activity revolves around or portrays a perceived danger. Therefore, the negative type is unsuccessful in alleviating children’s anxiety, helping them attain resolution or healing (Dripchak, 2007). Dripchak affirms that “[t]he risk of the negative type of PTP is that it may actually worsen the traumatic effects and cause developmental regression” (Dripchak, 2007, p. 126). The three novels in this study, *Terrorist*, *Falling Man*, and *The Submission*, deal with children’s trauma from different perspectives, including the negative and positive types of the PTP.

3. Textual Analysis

Although children are minor characters in the three novels, the authors devote part of their narratives to shed light on how children, between ages 5 and 16, are traumatized and react to their trauma.

3.1 Terrorist

In *Terrorist*, the media coverage of the 9/11 events has shocked the imagined society. Watching people covered with ashes, falling from the towers, and burning to death traumatize them, including the children. They incur a secondary trauma because, as Bond and Craps suggest, “*experiencing 9/11 vicariously through television footage could lead to traumatization*” (Bond & Craps, 2020, p. 89). They term such trauma as “*mass-mediated trauma*” (Bond and Craps, 2020, p. 89). Some traumatized people associate terrorism with Islam because the media coverage of the

events portrays Islam as a violent religion. The repetitive footages of the attacks create negative emotional states among a number of people in society against Islam and Muslims.

To express their anger, anxiety, and fear, some of them engage in committing hate crimes. The narration shows that Ahmad Ashmawy's home receives several abusive calls because of his religion. Ahmad's mother, Teresa Mulloy, explains to Jack Levy, Ahmad's teacher, that they have changed their telephone number because "*after Nine-Eleven we were getting hate calls*" (Updike, 2006, p. 79). The children learn that their parents are afraid of Islam and Muslims because radical Muslims carry out the terrorist attacks. Therefore, some of them use the Internet to send messages about possible attacks while others phone their families to threaten them. Beth Levy explains to her sister Hermione that the ongoing threats on the Internet are not serious: "*a lot of this chatter is just high-school and college kids making mischief. Some of them call themselves Mohammedans just to annoy their parents*" (Updike, 2006, p.131). By doing so, the traumatized children are engaging in a negative playing activity with their families. In other words, they realize that people are frightened by the attacks; therefore, they want them to become terrified. This coping strategy, the negative playing activity, shows that the children are acting out their trauma. They repeat the negative components of their trauma by calling themselves 'Mohammedans' to refer to radical Muslims who carried out the attacks.

As the novel progresses, we realize that Ahmad radicalization influences his relationship to other students at school. The narrator relates that "*[Ahmad's] religion [...] holds him rather aloof from his classmates and the studies on the curriculum*" (Updike, 2006, p.8). Ahmad talks only to his classmate Joryleen, to whom he has sexual impulses. The narrator tells us that "*he thinks of sinking himself into her body and knows from its richness and ease that this is a devil's thought*" (Updike, 2006, p. 73). However, Joryleen has a boyfriend, Tylenol, who used to bully Ahmad by calling him an Arab. In one passage, when Tylenol hears that Ahmad goes to the church to listen to Joryleen, he tells Ahmad: "*Hey. You Arab. [...] you don't go there. She doesn't give a flying fuck about you. You know what a fly fuck is, Arab? A flying fuck is when you do it to yourself, like all you Arabs do. You all faggots, man*" (Updike, 2006, pp. 97-98). This passage shows that Tylenol bullies Ahmad because he is Arabic. He also bullies him by claiming that all Arabs are sexually repressed. His attitudes appear to be derived from stereotypical assumptions about Arabs and from the media's portrayal of Arabs after the 9/11 attacks. Tylenol, like many other Americans, is traumatized and feels vulnerable because he fears to burn to death in new terrorist attacks. Therefore, his bully behavior towards Ahmad is a coping strategy for his trauma. Plexousakis et al. contend that "*[b]ullying and victimization are interrelated with symptoms of psychological trauma*" (Plexousakis et al., 2019, p. 1). Accordingly, Tylenol's "*aggressive and bully behavior in this case consist a coping strategy/defence mechanism against feelings of vulnerability or even depression and low self-esteem*" (Plexousakis et al. 2019, p. 11).

3.2 Falling Man

In *Falling Man*, the children suffer from both primary and secondary trauma. Justin, a seven-year-old and the son of the protagonist Keith Nedudecker, is traumatized by the 9/11 attacks because his father was inside the WTC when the planes hit the towers. Keith tells his wife, Lianne, that he and Justin "*talked about [the attacks]. But only once*" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 72). His father tells him about his horrifying experience and how he miraculously has survived the attacks with

significant injuries in his hand and many minor glass-cuts on his body and face. Listening to his father's tragedy and seeing his wounds makes Justin suffering vicarious trauma.

Katie (Justin's friend and classmate) is another child who is traumatized by the attacks. Lianne tells her husband that "*Katie claims that she saw the plane hit Tower One. She says she was home from school, sick, standing at the window when the plane flew by*" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 71). Katie is traumatized by the horrific scene of the plane crashing into the building and blast in a fire. In this sense, her trauma is a primary one. Katie's little brother, Robert, is traumatized by her story as well as by the images of the attacks on TV.

To cope with their trauma, the children invent their own version of the attacks. They decide not to tell anyone about it, including their parents. Isabel (Katie and Robert's mother) hears them talking about the attacks and behave suspiciously. She informs Lianne that "*[t]hey sort of conspire [and] sort of talk in code*" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 17). After a while, the parents discover what it is all about. Lianne explains to Keith that the children are playing with a pair of binoculars: "*They're searching the skies [...] looking for more planes. Waiting for [the 9/11] to happen again. This time with a pair of binoculars to help them make the sighting*" (DeLillo, 2007, pp. 71-72). Lianne also tells Keith that the children prepare a list of what the terrorists look like: "*Bin Lawton has a long beard. He wears a long rope. He flies jet planes and speaks thirteen languages but not English except to his wives. He has the power to poison what we eat but only certain foods. They're working on the list*" (DeLillo, 2007, p.74).

The children's play consists of three elements; the play gear (binocular), play rules (confidentiality) and play activities (watching the skies and listing the terrorists' descriptions). These elements indicate that the children's play is the negative type. On the one hand, searching the skies for more planes means that the children repeat their trauma. They live in fear and anxiety and overwhelmed by the idea of becoming a victim in a new possible terrorist attack. In this sense, the children do not suffer only secondary traumatization but also 'pre-traumatic stress.' Sinclair and LoCicero notice that "*[t]he psychological impact of terrorism is not limited simply to how people function in the wake of discrete attacks. Anticipating future terrorist attacks can also be extremely debilitating in terms of psychological functioning*" (Sinclair & LoCicero, 2007, p. 75).

On the other hand, the play's confidentiality implies that the children do not want anyone to stop them from searching the skies or telling them what actually has happened. For instance, in another passage, Keith tells Lianne that Justin believes that "*[t]he towers did not collapse. They were hit but did not collapse*" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 72). In a similar vein, the list which describes the terrorist suggests that the children use the name Bin Lawton to avoid repeating the real name, Bin Laden. In this sense, the children are melancholic, acting out their trauma to avoid remembering it.

3.3 The Submission

The children in this novel are traumatized vicariously by one of their parents' death in the 9/11 attacks. The narrative shows that children's traumatic experiences initiate strong emotions. For instance, William, a six-year-old and the son of the major character Claire Burwell develops severe traumatic reactions including throwing tempers tantrums, having regular nightmares, and forgetting things fast. His mother says that after his father's death "*William had become ever more difficult*" (Waldman, 2011, p. 42). Timmy and Jimmy, eight-year-old twins and sons of the

minor character Jane Hansen, suffer severely from traumatic stress after their father's death in the attacks. Their mother tells Claire that *"I'm not going to pretend they were angles before [9/11], but they were a lot easier. They're different kids"* (Waldman, 2011, p.182). The 9/11 trauma has strongly affected Timmy and Jimmy's attitudes that they have to undergo *"[h]undreds of hours of counseling"* (Waldman, 2011, p. 183).

The story shows that children involve themselves in some playing activities to cope with their trauma. For example, in a Circle Line cruise around Manhattan for the victims' families, the children play a game that simulates the firefighters who try to put out the fire of the Twin Towers and rescue the trapped victims. Timmy and Jimmy, whose father was a firefighter, do not allow William to play the fireman's role and tell him *"that [his mother] like[s] the bad guys. So [he] can't play the good guy"* (Waldman, 2011, p. 182). The bad guys, in the children's account, are the radical Muslims, and because William's mother, Claire, supports Mohammed Khan they believe that she likes the bad guys. This game can be categorized as a negative type because Timmy and Jimmy do not control their imagined world. In other words, they allow negative elements of their traumatic memory to interfere in the game by associating the Muslim terrorist to the non-radical Muslim.

Because of his trauma, William suffers from trouble sleeping and has a continued nightmare that his father could not find his way home. One morning, his mother suggests that they can build a cairn to guide his father home. They collect many small stones from their garden and drive to the city center. The narrator relates that *"[t]heir first stop was near the attack site but not within sight of it [...] they placed three stones at the base of a lamppost and stepped back"* (Waldman, 2011, p. 107). They continue to put the stones within a reasonable distance between them until they reach their home where they place the last pile in the garden. By doing so, William is convinced that his father will find his way home. This positive playing activity releases William's traumatic stress and helps him to sleep well again.

Besides, William's mother tells him that the winning design for building the memorial is called the Garden and explains to him what it means. The narrator says *"[t]he Garden, she told him, was a special place where his father could be found, even though William wouldn't be able to see him there"* (Waldman, 2011, p. 43). William seems to be consoled by the idea and decides to draw the Garden. Besides drawing the trees and flowers, and pathways the narrator informs us that *"William always drew in two little figures: himself and his father. In his drawings, the sun always shone"* (Waldman, 2011, p. 43). Expressing his feelings through drawings is a positive playing activity that helps him to cope with his trauma. Miller contends that *"[a]rt expression is a powerful way to safely contain and create separation from the terrifying experience of trauma"* (Miller, 2016, para 2). Drawing his father, flowers and shining sun indicate that William is able to identify the negative component of his traumatic experience, the loss of his father, but gain control over it.

At the end of the novel, we realize that William, he is an adult by now, and his colleague and girlfriend Molly make a documentary *"for the twentieth anniversary of the memorial competition"* (Waldman, 2011, p. 368). They travel to India to interview Mohammad Khan who leaves America after withdrawing his design from the competition. This episode indicates that William has recovered from his trauma because he does not consider all Muslims as terrorists or as his father's killers. Such understanding is due to the positive strategies he adopted when he was a child that had helped him work through his trauma and heal from it.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the three novels show that the horrific aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy has severely affected children. The analysis revealed that the children have experienced both primary and secondary trauma through mass media, what has happened to a loved one, or the loss of a loved one in the attacks. The analysis also found that children adopt different strategies to cope with their trauma. In particular, they play games or involve themselves in playing activities to express their traumatic stress. In the three novels, the children act out their trauma by adopting negative types of games or coping strategies, including bullying, pretending to be Muslims to frightening their families, searching the skies for more planes that might attack them again, and calling Muslims as the bad guys. In this sense, they repeat their traumatic experience through these games and playing activities.

The only positive response to the trauma is observed in *The Submission*. With help from his mother, William works through his trauma by playing positive games, including drawings. In this sense, Amy Waldman refers to parents or other family members' essential role in helping children work through their traumatic experiences. According to what this study has revealed, I conclude that although the authors in the three novels devote a short space for depicting children's trauma, they succeed in representing the severe effects of the 9/11 attacks on children's mental and psychological health.

About the Author

Hasan Abbakar Mohammad obtained a Bachelor of Art and Education (Honors) in English Language and History at the University of Khartoum in 2006. After graduation, he worked as an English language teacher in different institutions including, Gar Hiraab basic school for girls, The National Network for Education, Cambridge International (Sudan), and Sudan International University. In 2013 the author moved to Norway, where he obtained a Master's in English from the University of Agder. Recently, the author has been preparing a research proposal for a Ph.D. degree in contemporary American literature, focusing on 9/11 novels.

Conflict of Interest Statement

I declare that I have no financial and personal relationship with any organizations or people that can inappropriately influence my work.

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