Reconstructing the Past: Transgenerational Trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's Everything Is Illuminated

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Abstract- Through innovative narrative structure Jonathan Safran Foer explores about transgenerational trauma in his debut novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002). He tries to bring out the traumatic condition faced by his characters. Jonathan describes his journey to Ukraine in search of the woman, Augustine, who save his grandfather from the Holocaust. While doing so he simultaneously presents a fictionalized history of his ancestral shtetl, Trachimbrod. Readers can understand that through this dual narrative approach he explains about the traumatic memory that remains through many generations, tormenting their memory and which has a great impact in shaping their identity and relationships and most importantly the storytelling itself. Through this novel, he tries to bring out the truth that trauma is not merely a historical event but a living presence, haunts the memory and which is passed from generation to generation. His grandfather's suicide has a great impact on him indirectly and feels inexplicably bound to confront. Same as his Ukrainian guide Alex and Alex's grandfather also carry the same type of complicity, even though they belong to different generations. Through these characters, Jonathan tries to reveal how trauma affects both victims and the bystanders. The writer's fragmented narrative style mirrors the disorganized nature of traumatic memory. His way of storytelling becomes a means for transmitting trauma and a great method of working through it. The devastation of Trachimbrod and erasure of its inhabitants completely represents the historical massacre leaving a deep scar in the memory of many generations. They try to reconstruct identity from fragments and absences. Eventually, *Everything is Illuminated* discusses about transgenerational trauma where complete healing remains subtle. Through this storytelling technique, the author brings out the means of bearing witness, preserving it in the memory, and also tries to create a connection between the trauma caused within families, communities and history itself.

Keywords: Trauma, Holocaust, identity, generations, history.

INTRODUCTION

Everything Is Illuminated (2002) by Jonathan Safran Foer is a novel that discusses the narrative form, memory and identity. It serves as a profound meditation on how trauma reverberates across generations, particularly in the context of the Holocaust and its enduring impact on Jewish identity. The novel is considered as an exploration of trauma, in particular transgenerational trauma. Through the contemporary quest and a fictional reconstruction of a destroyed shtetl, he tries to bring out the historical trauma, which reflects across time and has a great impact on the descendants who have never directly experienced the original catastrophe. This article examines the representation of transgenerational trauma in *Everything Is Illuminated* to explain how Foer portrays trauma as a living force that tends to shape individual identity, interpersonal relationships and storytelling.

Transgenerational trauma is nothing but the inherited trauma, which refers the ways in which psychological and emotional wounds of an old generation in transferred down to the next generation. This transfer is down without their concern or knowledge. This trauma is often associated with historical catastrophes, such as war, displacement and collective violence. In literary studies, it is noted that transgenerational trauma becomes a crucial lens to understand the narratives of the past imprints which is passed to the descendants knowing or unknowingly. When talking about the specific characteristics about the transgenerational trauma the researchers Ursula König and Cordula Reimann (2018) in their article *"Closing a gap in conflict transformation: Understanding collective and transgenerational trauma"* explains,

> Transgenerational trauma is here understood as a particular form of both, individual and collective trauma: Its particularity is the transmission from one generation to the next. The specific characteristic features of transgenerational trauma are that embodied memories and the knowledge of what happened in the past are disconnected the current emotions of anger, fear and/or guilt and responsibility and physical reactions. These symptoms are comparable with symptoms of individual trauma. (p. 19)

With the two main characters in the novel, Jonathan and Alex, the writer tries to dig the histories. He tries to bring out the truth which had been erased and displaced through silence. Moreover, he attempts to show how the third generation wanted to bridge the gap between the past and present even though they are not able to understand it fully. In utter confusion, the third generation travel in their life to find their identity and prove their lineage. Foer tries to bring out the nostalgic feelings through his characters in the novel. Each and every character in the novel tries to reveal their past and helps Jonathan and Alex to find the truth.

About the writer

Being a prominent American novelist, Jonathan Safran Foer was born to a Jewish family in Washington. His mother Esther was the child of Holocaust survivors. Since Foer was interested in writing, he briefly attended medical school but abandoned it, since he was not interested in it. *Everything is Illuminated* is his debut novel. He was inspired by his family history and Jewish heritage. This work won him many awards including National Jewish Book Award and the Guardian First Book Award. He has now became an acclaimed writer and his books are being translated into many languages and read worldwide.

He was acclaimed as a renowned writer for his experimental narrative structures, various perspectives and with deep emotional intensity blending with humour. He mostly uses fragmented storytelling with multiple narration to visualize trauma, memory and identity. He tries to blend metafictional techniques along with historical facts and fiction. He explores various themes regarding family, memory, culture, Jewish identity and the state of violence in the society.

His writings mostly focuses on Jewish history and post-Holocaust materials. His themes revolve around ancestry, memory about culture and deep insight about trauma. He not only explore trauma and Holocaust but also explored climate change and ethical consumption. While describing the issues he combines his personal narratives with research to address these issues.

Trauma Studies

Trauma studies has emphasized that traumatic events often extend beyond the original victims to shape the psychology of subsequent generations. In this regards Balaev, Michelle (2018), in her article title "Trauma studies" defines

> Trauma is defined in relation to the process of remembering and as an event harbored within the unconscious that causes a splitting of the ego or dissociation. (p. 361)

It describes that trauma is not only the painful event that happened in the past, but as something that becomes embedded in the unconscious mind. This happens because the memory where the events are stored becomes fragmented, repressed or stored outside normal consciousness. This post memory describes how the descendants of trauma survivors inherit memories that appear to be lived experiences.

The novel interrogates the ways in which traumatic memory is transmitted within families and communities, often in fragmented, distorted, or silenced forms. The grandfather's inability to speak about his wartime experience, the gaps in family histories and the psychological burdens carried by those who never directly experience the atrocities all point to what is called transgenerational trauma. When analysing about the concept of trauma in Foer's works, in her article titled "Trauma Writing: Representation of Trauma and Its Transmission in Jonathan Safran Foer's Everything Is Illuminated" Staňová, Michaela (2012) states,

> When focusing on Foer's novel from the point of view of trauma, some key terms should be elaborated. Trauma itself is a word of a Greek origin meaning *wound,* and dictionaries mostly define it as "[a] bodily injury produced by an act f violence or some agency outside the body, the condition resulting from the injury; or a startling experience that has a lasting effect on mental life" (Borrowman 4). (p. 96)

The novel suggests that second and third generation descendants of trauma survivors inherit not just stories, but also psychological imprints: anxiety, obsessive documentation, an urgent need to recover lost histories and a haunting sense of absence. Through the protagonist's compulsive writing and Alex's gradual discovery of his own grandfather's complicity in wartime violence, Foer demonstrates how descendants must excavate painful truths to break cycles of silence and begin the process of healing.

Foer and Transgenerational Trauma

Jonathan Safran Foer's novels mostly reflect many traumatic events. In *Everything is Illuminated*, the protagonist Jonathan, is not directly related to Holocaust. Even though he is separated from this incident by several generations, he is compelled to confront its lingering emotional presence. To fill historical gaps, Ukraine duplicates the psychological need of the post memory generations, which is left by silence, suppression and loss. In shaping his sense of responsibility, these memories have a great influence. He constructs this work around two corresponding narratives, which acts as a vehicle for trauma transmission. The first one is, his protagonist Jonathan's contemporary journey and the other the fictional history of Trachimbrod. Through this journey Foer brings out the dual structure which embodies the fragmented multi layered nature of trauma. The researcher Amal El Mansouri (2022) tries to give an explanation about how traumatic events cause a damage in individuals memory and also psyche.

> The idea that a traumatic event breaks the mind, fractures the psyche, and even shatters meaning totally establishes the field's basic boundaries, and it continues to influence critical discourse even when alternative methodologies refute it. (p.142)

This is exhibited when Jonathan, the protagonist's quest for Augustine represents the pull of inherited trauma. Although he did not experience the Holocaust, the sensitive residue of his grandfather's misery, impact in shaping his identity. A small photograph of a woman named Augustine with his grandfather makes him to search for his family history. He learns that she was the person who saved his grandfather during World War II. When he was enquired about how he knew the name of that lady, he gets the answer from the back of the photograph which states, "This is me with Augustine, February 21." (Foer, 60) written by his grandfather. This photograph was saved by his grandmother for more that fifty years and then was passed to his mother. When referring to it he states,

> "My grandmother gave it to my mother two years ago, and she said that this was the family that saved my grandfather from the Nazis. […] No. We couldn't ask her anything about it. […] She held on to the photograph for fifty years. If she had wanted to tell us anything about it, she would have" (Foer, 61).

He wanted to know about the hidden truth about it. He tries to find the truth with the help of this small photograph but he could not. He even gets confused about his Grandfather's role of the past. He couldn't understand the traumatic state of his grandfather when his wife and baby was murdered by the Nazis. Foer brings out the pathetic situation that this traumatic incident affected many others and not only Jonathan indirectly.

Jonathan's journey to Ukraine becomes an act of postmemory, an attempt to assemble a past that exists in fragments. He grows up hearing lot of stories about his grandfather and about the destruction of shtetl of Trachimbrod. He struggles to get it all connected. In her article "*The generation of postmemory*" Marianne Hirsch (2008) states,

> Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (p. 103)

Through this the researcher describes how the second-generation individuals have a deep connection to their parents' experiences that those memories feel almost like their own, even though they did not live through the events themselves. The trauma is transmitted across generations through stories, images and family dynamics. Jonathan couldn't resolve all these confusions.

Alex, also becomes a victim of postmemory. Like Jonathan he too is not directly affected by Holocaust trauma. But his life is shaped by the silence and suppressed memories of Pre and Post Societ Ukraine. His grandfather's concealed history creates

a confused state in his understanding of his own lineage. When he encounters Jonathan's chapters and tend to describe the journey through letters. He too slowly caught in the act of entangled chains of reconstructing a past which his grandfather fails to reveal. Foer describes effectively how through postmemory functions affect not only direct familial heritage but also ethically with another's history.

The next important things is the disrespectful history about Augustine's hometown, Trachimbrod. The search of the past makes him to consider tow Holocaust testimonies, one by Lisa, the last remaining survivor of Trachimbrod and the other is Alex's own grandfather. They fail to gather information about the place. Searching about this place becomes magical realist chronicles and later function as an imaginative reconstruction of a lost world. The landscapes Jonathan and Alex traverse are marked by absence, empty fields where communities once thrived. Since the actual history has been erased, Jonathan was forced to imagine, since imagination becomes a necessary tool for filling the absence, which becomes a process of identifying the postmemory. Through these characters the writer says that trauma often leaves behind not only loss but also a haunting presence that demands acknowledgement.

Inheritance of Trauma:

Foes in this novel explores how trauma is not confined within those who have directly suffered it but is passed down across generations. It tends to shape the characters memory, identity and even their relationships. The effect of Holocaust is beautifully depicted by the writer which haunts the descendants knowingly or unknowingly. The writer through his pain characters reveals how trauma is embedded in family stories, silences and myths and also later influences the generations who couldn't understand their present and their past.

Jonathan's grandfather hid his past pains. His silence itself becomes a part of the generational memory. Hidden description and strong information about his past create a space and psychological echoes. This makes a number of questions, anxieties and desires to explore truth. Coherent narration, disorder, repetitive or ambiguous forms are all resisted by trauma frequently. The author's use of magical realism and humour highlights trauma's emotional complexity, illustrating the tension between unbearable pain and the psychological need to distance oneself.

The transmission of trauma across generations are represented by the emotional and psychological journey of the protagonist. The sudden suicide of this grandfather made Jonathan with irrevocable questions. His grandfather hides his wartime experiences to fill that decades later by this grand son. His grandfather's suicide marks the long-term psychological burden of unanswered traumatic memory. The next generation must confront with the various forms of trauma such as, guilt, despair or incapacity.

The way trauma crosses generations is not only witnessed in Jonathan's case but also in Alex's family. His grandfather feels guilty about what he did during the war, and it manifests as emotional distance, increased anger, and secrecy. Such behaviors on the part of his grandfather influence Alex, who grows up in a confusing and fearful environment. Trauma is directly passed down to him through the emotional scenes and the atmosphere within the family. At a point, Alex understands his grandfather's past. It shows how confronting inherited trauma might foster healing, empathy, and transformation.

Jonathan's imaginative reconstruction of this place signifies an act of inheriting and preserving a lost memory. Alex becomes an active witness to the history of the protagonist as well as to his own through those letters. Jonathan cannot rebuild Trachimbrod entirely. Indeed, the novel concludes that inherited trauma is not a burden but a call to remembrance. With Jonathan and Alex, Foer attempts to revisit traumatic histories in such a manner that both recognition and reappropriation of their sense of identity are possible. The novel represents the moment of the inheritance of trauma as one hovering in time between the past and the present, with the continuous memory or suppressed memory shaping the emotional life of generations to follow.

CONCLUSION

The thing Jonathan most wants to do that he could not rebuilt Trachimbrod. Due to his grandfather death, he cannot do anything on his own. His traumatic would is because of his failure to understand. This novel shows, through its fragmented structure, multiple timelines, and the

interaction of descendants from victims and bystanders alike, that trauma is alive as it continues to shape identities years after the occurrence of the original event. The novel ends without resolution, which suggests that trauma inevitably ripples forward into future generations.

Trauma is passed through memory, silence, guilt, and emotion by Alex's family history, although the protagonists of the novel seek their ancestral past. This novel discloses how transgenerational trauma is both a problem and a responsibility, compelling descendants to confront gaps, losses, and moral complexities. He contends that it is there, when the past is being retold, reclaimed, and reimagined, that healing can commence.

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