

Finding Identity through Trauma

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Abstract

The following paper focuses on the analysis of traumatized characters in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel Everything Is Illuminated (2002) by means of trauma theory. The analysis of traumatized characters in this novel has confirmed the assertion that identity can be divided or damaged by traumatic experiences. Furthermore, the disruption of identity caused by either surviving, witnessing or even perpetrating traumatic events can be transmitted onto other generations. The role of postmemory has proved to be an extremely important tool in reinforcing repressed identity. The articulation of trauma through writing has shown the role which literature plays as a healing factor in trauma resolution.

Keywords: trauma, identity, Jewish American, transmission, transgenerational, postmemory

According to Howe, “tradition seemingly discarded can survive underground for a generation and then, through channels hard to locate, surface in the works of writers who may not even be aware of what is affecting their consciousness” (13). Howe’s allusion to the return of tradition in Jewish American writing has proved to be a correct prognosis, despite his initial prediction that Jewish American literature had accomplished its process of assimilation into the mainstream American literature. However, the resurrection of tradition in Jewish American literature has also brought back some unresolved historical or personal traumas which seem to be significant for the assertion of post-modern Jewish American identity. Trauma and memory, and their impact on the assertion of ethnic and personal identity, have become an important part of recent postmodern interdisciplinary research, especially in the area of literature. The narratives of the survivors, witnesses and perpetrators of trauma and their relation to memory have gained a tremendous importance in resolving various forms of traumas. As LaCapra points out, “the memory lapses of trauma are conjoined with the tendency compulsively to repeat, relive, be possessed by, or act out traumatic scenes of the past [...] in this sense, what is denied or repressed in a lapse of

memory does not disappear; it returns in a transformed, at times disfigured and disguised manner” (10).

Since trauma is rooted in individual as well as collective forms of identity, it may affect the process of both collective and personal identity formation. The complexity of Jewish identity is examined from the perspective of a generation that has no firsthand experience of persecution, the Holocaust or the difficult process of immigration. And yet, as we will demonstrate in our analysis, all of these themes occur in contemporary Jewish American literature from a second-hand or vicarious perspective. The study of identity has become a crucial subject of research in the last two decades. Sociologists initially focused on examining how interpersonal communication forms the individual ‘self’, however the research of the past decades has focused more on the definition of ‘collective identity’. Various sociological constructs have attempted to address the notion of ‘we’ and the notion of ‘ness’. Jenkins states that much contemporary writing about identity treats it as something that simply *is*. This pays insufficient attention to how identity works or ‘is worked’. Understanding these processes is central to understanding identity. Indeed, identity can only be understood as a process, as ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ (Jenkins 5). London and Chazan define identity as the point of intersection between the individual and other people, the sense of self simultaneously as an individual and as a member of a social group. They assert that identity is a synthesis of cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements (56). However, none of the above definitions are capable of delineating what Jewish identity is. Inability to determine whether Jews should be considered in terms of religion, ethnicity, race or culture indicates that identity is formed in specific historical and cultural circumstances, dependent on the social and discursive factors that bring it into being (Grauer 271). Kugelmass claims that to this day Jewish textuality, whether religious or secular in orientation, constitutes a collective meditation on a changing and strikingly amorphous entity, a meditation that focuses on the questions “Who we are and why?” (5). He states that such queries are uniquely poignant for a group that retains a national consciousness while existing as a diasporic people with considerable historical depth (ibid). The historical depth which Kugelmass emphasizes is basically the traumatic past of the Jews, which is still present in contemporary Jewish American fiction. The connection between trauma and identity therefore offers a stimulus when attempting to define contemporary Jewish identity.

The following text examines traumatized characters in J. S. Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and the transmission of intergenerational and transgenerational trauma that causes disruption in identity formation. When discussing the differences between intergenerational and transgenerational transmissions of trauma, Atkinson suggests it would be more appropriate to refer to intergenerational trauma as “trauma passed down directly from one generation to the next, while transgenerational trauma would be trauma transmitted across a number of generations, for example from a grandparent, through to a grandchild” (180). In “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” Michelle Balaev writes that a central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity (149). This serves as the basis for a larger argument that suggests identity is formed by the intergenerational transmission of trauma (ibid). Furthermore, Balaev argues that when stories of one generation are transmitted to another through various texts, personal trauma may become “transhistorical trauma”

and thus “defines contemporary individual identity, as well as racial or cultural identity” (ibid). Transhistorical trauma creates a parallel relationship between an individual and the group, and “indicates that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory” (ibid.). However, the analysis focuses not only on those characters who struggle with Jewish identity, but also on those whose identity is Gentile but who have, nonetheless, been confronted with the suffering of Jews. In the analysis of Gentile and Jewish relationships, we aim to demonstrate how anti-Semitism is also generationally transmitted, how it increases in life-threatening situations such as war, and how it can destroy even the strongest ties between Gentiles and Jews.

The transgenerational transmission of trauma is particularly significant in the novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) by Jonathan Safran Foer. The novel deals predominantly with transhistorical trauma. As Caruth notes, this form of literary trauma theory makes several important claims about trauma, stating that traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable (*Unclaimed* 4). The massive trauma suffered by a particular ethnic, racial or gender group can be experienced by single individuals decades after the event. It is also asserted that this process of the transmission of trauma can also work in reverse, and that an individual trauma can be passed to others who share the same social or biological similarities (Balaev 149). The experiences of the three generations portrayed in the novel demonstrate Caruth’s assertion, and they draw attention to how continuity in memory, and its reinforcement, repetition and subsequent recording, can contribute to finding and strengthening one’s own cultural, ethnic or personal identity. Foer points out how attempts to hide or bury missing pieces of the traumatic past do not erase the trauma itself, but only prolong it and transfer it to other generations. Foer’s purpose is to show the continuity of trauma in the lineage of two particular families, from its roots in the pre-war *shtetls* to its impact on contemporary life in both the Ukraine and America. The author himself has explained that his work was originally planned as non-fiction, but once he started writing, he realized that a great deal of information would always be missing in an imagined personal history. As he was writing, he realized that many memories were not his own memories, but in fact those of his grandparents (Foer, “Interview”). This is the well-known concept of postmemory, studied by Marianne Hirsch. She states that the term “postmemory” can be used to describe the relationship that subsequent generations have with the experiences of forebears who directly witnessed cultural or collective trauma, experiences which later generations “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up (107). Hirsch goes on to explain that these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively that they seem to constitute memories in their own right:

Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly,

by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (107)

In the novel, both grandsons, first Jonathan and later Alex, have no direct memory of *shtetl* life, but have instead absorbed the memories of their grandparents. The character of Alex's grandfather thus serves as a mediator between the past and the present. As Caruth asserts, trauma is not manifested in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way in which its largely unassimilated nature (the failure to fully comprehend the event in the first instance) returns to haunt the survivor in the future (*Unclaimed* 4). The grandfather's delayed reaction to his traumatic past is an excellent illustration of Caruth's assertion. In terms of trauma theory, the character of the grandfather is simultaneously a survivor, a witness and a perpetrator. In order to emphasize the complexity of the character and his own inability to articulate his trauma, Foer delegates the task of explication onto the character of his grandson Alex, who learns about the traumatic past through the observation of his grandfather's behavior, and contributes towards its resolution. Furthermore, as a consequence of helping to resolve his grandfather's trauma, Alex is able to confront his own trauma of identity. By delegating the narration onto the grandson, the author's purpose is to emphasize the "unspeakability" of one's own trauma as well as the fact that trauma is unlikely to be resolved without the assistance of others. Towards the end of her first introduction to *Trauma: Explorations of Memory* (1995), Caruth explains that trauma is not only a form of absence or "departure," but also a call to survival through new forms of contact with others: "The final import of the psychoanalytic and historical analysis of trauma is to suggest that the inherent departure, within trauma, from the moment of its first occurrence, is also a means of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event: that the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another" ("Trauma" 10).

Theorists of trauma acknowledge the long-recognized phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder. The symptoms of PTSD can be easily identified in the character of the grandfather on several levels. The most significant is the recurring dream which the character experiences every time he falls asleep in the novel. On each occasion, his grandson has to remind him that the dream is not real:

He did not know where he was.
"Anna?" he asked. That was the name of my grandmother who died two years yore.
"No, Grandfather," I said, "it is me, Sasha."
He was very ashamed. I could perceive this because he rotated his face away from me. (34)

However, the recent death of his wife is not the major traumatic event which causes the grandfather to show signs of PTSD. As the story unfolds, both Alex and Jonathan are repeatedly confronted with the grandfather's increasing outbursts of unexplained anger. When the grandfather learns about their journey to former *shtetls*, whose destruction he himself had witnessed, he is suddenly reminded of his trauma and immediately refuses to take part in the journey, exclaiming: "I do not want to drive ten hours to an ugly city to

attend to a very spoiled Jew” (7). Furthermore, when he learns that he needs to drive an American Jew to the place of his forgotten past, he is terrified. The trauma he suffered as a witness to the extermination of the Jews of his village is suddenly reawakened. When he recognizes the woman in the old photograph which Jonathan has brought to Ukraine, his fear of confronting his seemingly forgotten past is intensified and he realizes that he will finally be forced to face his personal history. Yet despite his acceptance of the inevitability of the situation, he continues to deny any connection with the place or the woman in the photograph. His neurotic, aggressive, vulgar and anti-Semitic behavior reflects his inability to come to terms with the haunting past which he has been trying to hide from his family. After losing his wife and later acknowledging his total failure as a father and a grandfather, he gradually reveals the cause of his behavior.

In the grandfather’s case, pointing at his best friend Herschel in order to avoid being shot together with his wife and small baby represents a borderline situation, though it is an event which was not unusual during the war period. Threats by Nazi soldiers were an effective weapon for intimidating people into betraying not only their best friends, but also their closest family in order to save their own lives. The consequence of such a terrifying decision causes a serious traumatic disorder, the resolution of which is impossible even after a long period of time. In the grandfather’s account of the terrifying event, it is possible to imagine the dreadfulness of the situation and the impossibility of making a right decision. The grandfather’s act represents a universal ethical dilemma which is undergone by individuals in borderline situations. Even though the grandfather in Foer’s novel tries to explain the sacrifice of his best friend in order to save his own family, he realizes that such an act can never be justified. The grandfather’s long account of this event is presented in the form of a stream of consciousness which continues uninterrupted and without punctuation for more than six pages in the novel. This genuine monologue is the only part of the grandfather’s narrative which extends beyond his usual one-sentence statements. The volume and intensity of this narrative is the highlight of the novel in terms of how the denial of trauma suddenly explodes and releases the accumulated feelings of guilt and pain which had previously been inexpressible. By articulating his trauma—of which he is a survivor, a witness and a perpetrator in one—he initiates his own journey towards healing and forgiveness, yet it is a journey which ultimately results in his suicide:

...the General shothiminthehead and said I am becoming tire of this and he went to the next man in line and that was me who is a Jew he asked and I felt Herschel’s hand again and I know that his hand was saying pleaseplease eli please I do not want to die please do not point at me you know what is going to happen to me if you point at me do not point at me I am afraid of dying I am so afraid of dying I am soafraidofdying Iamsoafradiofdying who is a Jew the General asked me again and I felt on my other hand the hand of Grandmother and I knew that she was holding your father and that he was holding you and that you were holding your children I and so afraid of dying [...] and I said he is a Jew ... and Herschel embraced my hand with much strength and he was my friend my best friend [...] and I pointed and for him that Herschel was murdered that I murdered Herschel... (250–251)

According to LaCapra, in the case of unmastered trauma, the victim is often “haunted” by the original event and caught up in its compulsive repetition. The grandfather is totally unable to initiate the process of working-through, since his feelings of guilt haunt him to such an extent that he is unable to forgive himself. His inability to come to terms with the traumatic events is all the more pronounced because he feels guilt not only for sending his best friend to his death, but also for having witnessed the massacre of people he had known, an experience which makes him feel as haunted as any other survivor or witness of the event: “Just because I was not a Jew, it does not mean that it did not happen to me” (246). As LaCapra further asserts, victims who are acting out the past are caught in it as if it were an eternal present, compulsively repeating actions related to the crisis, forever revisiting the site of trauma (149). However, the grandfather tries to avoid undergoing the process of acting-out, and obstinately refuses to revisit the site of his trauma. Instead, he pretends that he does not know such a place even existed and intentionally prolongs the journey to the site—actions which demonstrate that he is not prepared to resolve his trauma. It is apparent that his process of acting-out is too abrupt, with the result that his working-through is unlikely to be completed, and indeed it is during this process that he takes his own life. Suicide is perhaps not the most fulfilling method of resolving trauma; however in preventing the transmission of transgenerational trauma it seems almost inevitable for the grandfather. Surprisingly, the tragic outcome of his resolution of trauma results in a positive development for his grandson. The grandfather’s abrupt resolution of his trauma by taking his own life accelerates Alex’s development as a character.

At the beginning of the novel, Alexander Perchov is portrayed as a carefree, superficial teenager who is mostly interested in music, girls, pornographic magazines and anything American. Foer masterfully employs humor in order to both describe the superficiality of the character and to indicate that he will undergo a profound development. Alex lives with his parents and younger brother Igor in Odessa, where he occasionally assists his father at Heritage Tours, their small family business which takes Jewish Americans to visit the villages of their ancestors. His ignorance of his own country’s history as well as his own family history is apparent on his first meeting with an American who also “happens” to be a Jew. Jonathan is the same age as Alex, but he does not share his typical teenage interests; moreover he seems rather serious and enigmatic. During his journey to the former *shtetls*, Alex also undergoes a journey towards the discovery of his own identity. When Jonathan announces that they will start their search for a woman from a photograph taken in a *shtetl*, Alex has no idea of what the word means despite the fact that prewar Ukraine was home to the fourth largest Jewish community in the world, the Jewish population of Odessa alone numbering 45,000:

“And the shtetls weren’t only Jews, so there should be others to talk to.”

“The whats?”

“Shtetls. A shtetl is like a village.”

“Why don’t you merely dub it a village?”

“It’s a Jewish word.”

“A Jewish word?”

“Yiddish.” (60)

Alex's ignorance of the history of his own country is not entirely his fault. Foer here indicates how some sections of history can be adapted or even erased to suit the purposes of particular political regimes. The Ukrainian complicity in the genocide of Jews was a historical fact which had been erased from history books; therefore Alex never had a chance to learn anything about it, despite the fact that his own grandfather had both witnessed and survived these atrocities. Because of his grandfather's unwillingness to discuss the events due to their traumatic nature, Alex only learns about these facts by meeting a complete stranger from America. In learning about both the erased parts of his country's history and the vanished *shtetls* themselves, he is then more able to comprehend the behavior of his grandfather and subsequently the behavior of his own parents.

From the beginning of the novel, Foer emphasizes Alex's desire to emigrate to America together with his younger brother Igor. At first, this wish appears to be the understandable longing of a teenager to experience all the familiar aspects of American life. He also claims that this is the main reason why he is trying so hard to learn English. However, his wish to emigrate to America indicates his subconscious desire to escape from the verbal and physical abuse to which he and his little brother are subjected by their alcoholic father. Alex conceals this personal family trauma by creating the impression of a cool and confident young man. After returning from the journey during which he learns about his grandfather's past, he is able to reinvent himself completely. If his grandfather's behavior before the journey had appeared to him to be "melancholy," he now sees that his grandfather is no longer able to hide his sadness. In one of his many letters to Jonathan, he describes how he notices his grandfather crying over the photographs that were in the box from Augustine or Lista, the mysterious woman in Jonathan's photograph who he believes saved his grandfather. In understanding his grandfather's trauma, he is able to see how that trauma has been transmitted to his father and his brother, but perhaps even more onto himself. The suicide of his guilt-ridden grandfather is the first step towards breaking the vicious circle of transmitted trauma in the family. The grandfather secretly acknowledges that his own catharsis lies in his death. Through his suicide, his guilt is inherited by his grandson who feels remorseful and wishes he could have dealt with his grandfather's trauma earlier. Instead of accepting the transmitted guilt of his grandfather, he also decides to take action and continues to break the circle of trauma by sending his abusive father away. The climax of Alex's reinvention of his identity lies in his effort to understand the trauma of his grandfather, and in his decision to deal with the long-term abuse he has suffered at the hands of his father. The final part of the novel portrays the character of Alex as a transformed man who has broken free from his obsession with America and who has become a contemplative writer; perhaps more importantly, he has managed to prevent the transmission of family trauma onto his younger brother.

The Jewish approach to history and memory is best expressed in the character of Jonathan. Jonathan's obsession with finding his own identity through the history of his grandfather is evidence of the transmission of trauma through three generations of his family, a situation comparable to that of Alex's family. This fixation on memories can be a result of the constant threat of being erased from history, but it can also lead to a much deeper preservation of one's cultural heritage. An obsession with the past is also evident in the character of Augustine or Lista, who stores hundreds of artifacts from the now vanished Trachimbrod. The hundreds of shoes, spectacles, and photographs that she has preserved

in her boxes are the only testimony to the Nazi destruction of the *shtetl*, an event which the grandfather had tried so hard to forget and which had been erased from the history books of Alex's generation. It is not typical for a twenty-one year old man to decide to set out on a journey from America to the Ukraine in order to search for the roots of his grandfather, a survivor of the Nazi genocide. Jonathan also confesses to Alex that he likes to collect anything which can later remind him of the places he has visited.

We would expect that the trauma of Jonathan's family would be more serious and would require a more urgent resolution, caused by the terrible losses suffered in the Holocaust. However, Jonathan learns nothing of his own family history, and instead invents his own memories of pre-war life in the *shtetls*. Paradoxically, the central trauma becomes that of the grandfather, who was both a witness and, to some extent, a perpetrator of the event. Thus, Foer turns our attention from a Jewish perception of the trauma to a Gentile perspective. As Caruth asserts, history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, and it is through history that we are implicated in each other's traumas (*Unclaimed Experience* 24).

Jonathan carries with him many copies of a single photograph of a woman whom he assumes had saved his grandfather from the genocide. This photograph is apparently the only evidence of his grandfather's connection to the place, and even that photograph is eventually responsible for changing the identity of Augustine to that of Lista. As Hirsch asserts, photography is a primary medium of the transgenerational transmission of trauma. She claims that the phenomenology of photography is a crucial element in the conception of postmemory as it relates to the Holocaust in particular:

To be sure, the history of the Holocaust has come down to us, in subsequent generations, through a vast number of photographic images meticulously taken by perpetrators eager to record their actions and also by bystanders and, often clandestinely, by victims. But it is the technology of photography itself, and the belief in reference it engenders, that connects the Holocaust generation to the generation after. Photography's promise to offer an access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power, makes it a uniquely powerful medium for the transmission of events that remain unimaginable. And, of course, the photographic meaning of generation captures something of the sequencing and the loss of sharpness and focus inherent in postmemory. (107)

In Jonathan's case, the photograph of Augustine initiates the process of writing, a process which is later taken over by Alex. The narratives of the trauma of both grandsons imply the healing effect of fiction, not only for the writer but also for the reader.

To conclude, our initial assertion that identity can be divided or damaged by traumatic experience transmitted from one generation onto another has demonstrated how by articulation of trauma, such identity can be successfully reinvented and how fiction plays an important role as a healing factor in trauma resolution. The result of such transmission is that contemporary Jewish American literature often shows a desire for a restoration of traditions, in addition to a resolution of long-term traumas. Despite the fact that the writer is temporally detached from the traumatic events of his ancestors, such as the pogroms in the *shtetls*, the Holocaust, persecution or exile, he returns to such themes in his contemporary writing in order to reinforce his own identity.

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