

9/11. FACT, CONCEPT & FICTION



IOANA CISTELECAN

ioana_cistelecan@yahoo.com

Senior Lecturer PhD, University of Oradea

Universitatii Street no 1, Oradea, Romania

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Abstract: The present paper intends to focus on the impact 9/11 tragic events had on and respectively got displayed into the very recent contemporary narrative, the way these episodes generated a freshly new literary pattern: the so-called 9/11 novel, its inner features and most of all its own dealing with trauma. The paper will also focus on J. S. Foer's book Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, in an attempt to reveal the frail balance between trauma, guilt and personal healing as far as the novel's characters are concerned, displaying a special interest in the protagonist's personal recipe of coping with trauma.

Key words: 9/11, trauma, trauma fiction, guilt, personal and collective trauma

In its most primary origin, the Greek word *trauma* referred to an injury inflicted on the body rather than on the mind. In its later usage, it is applied more and more to refer to conditions concerning the mind, as Caruth accurately noticed¹. Unlike the wounding of the body, which is a simple and in most cases healable injury, the wounding of the mind is much more complex because it is not experienced in real time, which makes it harder to register for our consciousness.

When scanning the earliest appearances of *trauma theory* in history, we are inevitably traced back to the early theories of Sigmund Freud, one of the very first to explore the realm of psychology and psychoanalysis. His research on trauma started at the end of the 19th century when he discovered that a psychological trauma was at the basis of women's so-called

¹ See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

hysteria. In his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), he explains the hysteria by suggesting that the respective women were sexually abused when they were young.

According to Freud, the actual trauma then “consists of two scenes - the earlier (in childhood) having sexual content but no meaning, the later (in puberty) having no sexual content but sexual meaning”¹. Freud concludes that the actual trauma is caused by the dialectic relation between the two events and the moment of latency between the two moments, when you remain unaware of the trauma. Although this model is especially used to explain the trauma of child abuse, it does also successfully explain the importance of the temporal delay, which seems to be inherent to trauma and which Freud calls ‘belatedness’.

Freud needed to adjust his theories later on, especially because of the First World War and the soldiers who came back from the battlefield with signs of *war neurosis*, even though some of them never were on the actual battlefield. This condition reappeared during the Second World War but it was not until the war in Vietnam that the ‘disease’ got real recognition. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association defined “the long-recognized but frequently ignored phenomenon under the title of ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD), which included the symptoms of what had previously been called *shell-shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses both human and natural catastrophes*”.

According to Shoshana Felman², “*The twentieth century can be defined as a century of trauma*”. September 9/11 2001, a universally shared traumatic event, inspired writers to “express their feelings about what had occurred”, so that readers could relate to the books “on a highly personal level”³. 9/11, 2001 consequently started a new period in both literature and history: even current events have a tendency to be explored through the prism of 9/11 episode.

¹ See Freud, S. (1966) *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1950/1895) in *Complete Psychological Works*, Hogarth Press, London.

² an American literary critic and professor; see Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious. Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 2002, p. 171.

³ In the words of Karen Rufle, researcher of Islamic and Muslim civilization.