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A Pluralistic Analysis of Traumatic Loss in *Hamnet* and *All Is True*

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fAbstract:

The article highlights how the study of trauma in different literary works, especially novels and movies, is interesting to all researchers. The reason for this is that expressions and visual effects, that are used by writers and directors, are presented in an attractive way for showing the effect of traumatic experience upon the traumatized characters. Trauma is a term used to describe the psychological and behavioral symptoms that afflict an individual by experiencing a traumatic event. This article tries to focus on a specific type of trauma which is called traumatic loss or traumatic grief. Trauma theory is used to shed light on how traumatic events are reflected in literature, historical texts, and movies by analyzing expressions of loss and grief. The article adopts Michelle Balaev's pluralistic trauma theory as an innovative approach to analyze traumatic loss thematically and technically in *All Is True* movie by the British writer, Ben Elton and in *Hamnet* novel by the Irish-British writer, Maggie O'Farrell. In discussing Shakespeare's life, none of scholars trace how his son Hamnet died. Although the novel and the movie are two different artistic mediums, they are historical fictions that imagine the reason behind Hamnet's death. Hence, the article aims to analyze traumatic loss in Elton's movie *All Is True* (2018) and Maggie's novel *Hamnet* (2020) and to show its effect upon Shakespeare and his family.

Keywords: Traumatic loss, grief, Balaev, pluralistic trauma theory, analytical method, death

1. Introduction

Some people have enough courage to cope with traumatic events that they experience in their life, but others may not have that courage. Thus, a set of psychological and behavioral symptoms begins to appear on them and hinders their daily life. Trauma is any traumatic event that causes extreme feelings of fear, helplessness, dissociation,

bewilderment, or other disruptive emotions that last long enough to negatively impact a person's attitudes, behaviour, or other functional elements. Trauma has many types that people may be experienced in life, causing anxiety and fear such as being involved in an accident, having an illness or injury, losing a loved one, or going through a divorce.

It is agreed that loss and grief are fundamental aspects of human experience. In consequence, the focus of this article will be on a specific type of trauma, which is a trauma of the loss of a loved one. This type is called traumatic loss or traumatic grief. In traumatic loss, death is sudden and unexpected that can lead to complicated grief reactions. Thompson et al. in their book *Handbook of Traumatic Loss* recognize traumatic loss as "much more fully as a multidimensional human phenomenon, not simply a medical condition" (i). Hence, Trauma is an interdisciplinary field; not only a psychological study.

Michelle Balaev asserts in her article "Trauma Studies" that trauma theory "is first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian theory" (360). Thus, Trauma theory emerged in the 20th century. The 20th century was an age of trauma due to the series of wars, conflicts and revolutions that were erupted in it and affected people with many traumatic experiences. Indeed, literature is always an art of becoming and a reflection of life at any ages. Therefore, the reflection of trauma in literature is unavoidable.

The pluralistic theory of trauma does not examine the structural dimensions of trauma or its effects of fragmentation upon the psyche, but it examines the diversified dimensions of trauma. The pluralistic theory of trauma sheds light on the idea of speakability of trauma.

Balaev determines many techniques the author used in trauma novel to convey traumatic experience such as the significant role of the traumatized protagonist, the image of landscape, temporal gaps, silence, and narrative omission. In this regard, pluralistic trauma theory is invented to emphasize on the external contextual factors of trauma as a narrative techniques for the analysis of trauma in literary texts.

Balaev proves that pluralistic trauma theory views memory as “an active process of creation and revision, not a process of reproduction” (*The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* 30). In traditional trauma theory, memory is considered as a storehouse that reproduce the traumatic experience as it is after a period of time of freezing it. On contrary, pluralistic trauma theory considers memory as “a fluid process, not static” (30). This makes trauma theory focusing on defining trauma and showing its value in textual representations to show individual and collective experience of suffering in relation to cultural studies rather than neurobiological studies. Understanding trauma beyond psychological limits makes the researcher focusing on Balaev’s theory of trauma to analyze traumatic loss in Ben Elton’s movie *All Is True* and Maggie O’Farrell’s novel *Hamnet* from a pluralistic-analytic perspective.

2. Aim and Scope

The purpose of this article is to analyze traumatic loss of Hamnet Shakespeare. The article focuses on the worst traumatic loss: the loss of a child. Indeed, the pluralistic theory of trauma is concerning about the external stressor to demonstrate that trauma happens in particular bodies, times, cultures, and locations, each influencing the interpretation and depiction of traumatic experience. Therefore, The article tries to apply trauma theory to Ben Elton's movie *All Is True* (2018) and

Maggie O'Farrell's novel *Hamnet* (2020) to investigate the many grieving emotions and the impact of severe loss on the greatest playwright William Shakespeare.

3. Background and Significance

William Shakespeare's biography has been discussed by many writers, critics, and scholars. Most of them shed light on Shakespeare's biography by talking about his life, his career, and his literary works. In discussing his life, none of these writers or scholars trace how his son Hamnet died. They just mention that he married Anne Hathaway and had three children, including Hamnet, but none of them discussed how this boy died at the age of eleven! As a result, the article proves the novelty of analyzing Hamnet Shakespeare's traumatic loss in Elton's movie and O'Farrell's novel from a pluralistic-analytic perspective.

All Is True (2018) is a British fictional historical movie written by Ben Elton and directed by Kenneth Branagh. In the article "Ben Elton: Biography" in IMDb, "Ben Elton was born on May 3, 1959 in London, England. He is a writer and actor, known for *The Young Ones* (1982), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) and *Maybe Baby* (2000)." IMDb also determines the biography of Kenneth Branagh in the article "Kenneth Branagh: Biography." In Belfast, Northern Ireland, on December 10, 1960, Kenneth Charles Branagh was born. His family relocated to Reading, Berkshire, England when he was nine years old. At age 23, Branagh joined the Royal Shakespeare Company, where he played the lead in "Romeo and Juliet" and "Henry V. By making *All Is True* movie, Kenneth Branagh brings William Shakespeare's life on screen.

All Is True is a portrait of William Shakespeare during the last three years of his life, as he leaves London and returns to his family in Stratford-upon-Avon. Ben Elton, The screenwriter, starts with historical

facts about Shakespeare's life during that time. Elton recalls a year of 1613 in which a devastating fire destroys the Globe Theatre during the first production of Shakespeare's play *All Is True*, which is about the life of Henry VIII. As a result, Shakespeare returns to Stratford and is haunted by the death of his son Hamnet. Shakespeare attempts to ease his grief by planting a memorial garden for his son.

Haunted by Hamnet's ghost, Shakespeare seeks to know the real reason behind Hamnet's death. He looks at the church's records, but there is nothing about young Hamnet's death. He becomes suspicious about whether the death of his only son was really due to the plague. He confronts Anne and Judith, pointing out the small number of deaths in Stratford in the summer of 1596. Though the historical record does not supply a cause of death for Hamnet, many historians assume that his death was a result of the bubonic plague. At the end, the movie reveals that Hamnet committed suicide by drowning in a pond because of his twin Judith's Jealousy. By writing *All Is True* movie, Ben Elton tries to fictionalize that Hamnet commits suicide like Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

On the other hand, *Hamnet* is an Irish historical fiction, published in 2020 by the Irish-British author Maggie O'Farrell. The biography of Maggie O'Farrell is determined through Kate Kellaway's article "Maggie O'Farrell: Having to bury a child must be unlike anything else" and *Hamnet's* "About the Author." O'Farrell was born in Coleraine, Northern Ireland, in 1972. In 1974, her family relocated to Britain. She was raised in Wales and Scotland with her mother and two sisters. Maggie O'Farrell is the author of eight novels: *After You'd Gone*, *My Lover's Lover*, *The Distance Between Us*, which won the Somerset Maugham Award, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*, *The Hand That First Held Mine*, which won the Costa Novel Award, *Instructions for a*

Heatwave, *This Must Be the Place* and *Hamnet* which won National Book Critics Circle prize for fiction. She is winner of the women's prize for fiction.

O'Farrell's *Hamnet* fictionalizes the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet by the great plague of London during the late of 16th century. The novel opens with Hamnet as a central character. Hamnet seeks for help to heal his twin Judith, who is afflicted with the great plague of London. The first section of the novel has two timelines. It goes back to the time when Shakespeare met Hamnet's mother to marry and jumps forth to the year when Hamnet died in 1596.

The article focuses on the analysis of the novel's second section that reveals grieving and loss expressions and the collective trauma of Shakespeare's family because of Hamnet's death. The novel imagines that Hamnet died because the plague is transmitted from Judith to him. After four years, Shakespeare writes his most famous tragedy *Hamlet*. By writing *Hamnet*, O'Farrell wants people to remember Shakespeare's son Hamnet who is immortalized in all Shakespeare's legendary works. Moreover, O'Farrell published her novel *Hamnet* in 2020 to recall traumatic loss due to the plague in the year of COVID-19. O'Farrell makes a connection between the 16th and 21st centuries in which both of them witness two pandemics: Black Death and COVID-19. The most important aspect behind writing *Hamnet* novel is the author's honesty. O'Farrell declares to Eleanor Wachtel in CBCnews the following:

there was a huge part of me that was unable to write this book while my son hadn't yet reached the age of 11. The main impetus behind writing the book for me was to give this boy his due, to sort of amplify the meaning of his death. This was not an insignificant death.

O'Farrell does not write *Hamnet* until her son becomes at the age of eleven to feel the real meaning of loss and to show how the death of Hamnet is a significant matter.

4. Methods

The article uses the analytical method to analyze traumatic loss in Elton's movie *All Is True* (2018) and Maggie's novel *Hamnet* (2020) and to show how manifestations of loss and grief are considered as a reaction to traumatic experience. The researcher uses some of the quotations from the novel or the screenplay and scenes from the movie as a proof to reflect traumatic loss and to analyze them thematically and technically.

5. Results

In analyzing traumatic loss thematically, the researcher finds that traumatic loss is reflected in traumatized person's expressions of loss and grief. Expressing about loss and grief asserts the idea of trauma's speakability of Balaev's pluralistic theory of trauma. It can be through verbal and non-verbal responses to enhance the analysis of traumatic loss theme.

In O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, the theme of traumatic loss and its effect upon Shakespeare's family are expressed at the dying moment of Hamnet into the following:

Agnes is whispering, Please, please, Hamnet, please, don't leave us, don't go. Near the window, Judith is struggling, asking to be placed next to him on the pallet, saying she needs him, she must speak to him, let her go. Eliza holds her, saying, There, there, to her, but has no idea what she means by that. Mary is kneeling at the end of the pallet, holding on to one of his ankles. Susanna is leaning her forehead into the plaster of the wall, her hands over her ears. (251)

O'Farrell brilliantly expresses the shocked responses of Hamnet's mother, sisters, aunt, and grandfather toward his death.

On the other hand, *All Is True* is a brilliant movie that tackles traumatic loss and its effect upon Shakespeare at the final days in his life. The researcher shows how this movie begins with a traumatic historical event in Shakespeare's life when the Globe Theater he owned was burned down during the performance of his play (Henry VIII) in 1613 AD. The researcher shows how Shakespeare becomes the protagonist of a tragedy instead of his fictional or historical characters in the last years of his life.

Traumatic loss is expressed through non-verbal response and silence in *All Is True* movie. This is noticeable in Shakespeare's standing in front of the lake and Hamnet's grave silently. He carries Hamnet's verses and gazes in his wishing dream that is shattered. The non-verbal responses of traumatic loss is also expressed through Shakespeare's crying.

To assert the idea of Balaev's trauma's speakability, the researcher shows how Shakespeare expresses about his grief and mourning his son into the following:

People often ask how I have writ so much. How I found the energy and dedication to sit alone at my desk writing play after play after play. The answer's simple, I was always in the company of my son. (Elton 72)

Hence, both O'Farrell and Elton convey the sorrowful feelings of loss through verbal and non-verbal responses by the traumatized characters in their literary works. By analyzing the expressions of loss and grief, the theme of traumatic loss is asserted in O'Farrell's *Hamnet* and Elton's *All Is True*. This also asserts the idea of trauma's speakability of Balaev's pluralistic theory of trauma and how analyzing the effect of

traumatic loss upon the traumatized person depends on internal and external struggles of the traumatized person according to historical, personal, social, and cultural factors.

In analyzing traumatic loss technically, the researcher depends on Balaev's techniques that are used in Ben Elton's movie and Maggie O'Farrell's novel. Balaev's pluralistic theory of trauma depends on the significant role of the protagonist in fiction. The protagonist is represented in the traumatized person in the world of the literary work. The researcher shows how Shakespeare was supposed to be the traumatized protagonist in *Hamnet*, but O'Farrell makes Hamnet the protagonist in her historical fiction. She wants to give Hamnet a voice and presence.

The technique of description is remarkable in *Hamnet*. This technique asserts Balaev's technique of the image of landscape. The image of landscape or describing the physical environment, whether real or imagined place, can also convey traumatic experience in trauma novel. O'Farrell has described Hamnet's grave as a real place into the following: "[t]he grave is a shock. A deep, dark rip in the earth ... And, now, here he will be, sealed in the earth for eternity, by the river" (275). In addition to considering trauma or traumatic loss as a shock, O'Farrell has described the grave as a shock too. It is the place that Hamnet will rest in peace for eternity.

As O'Farrell described Hamnet's grave in her novel to assert Balaev's technique of the image of landscape, the researcher shows how *All Is True* movie depicts the image of Hamnet's grave visually. Depicting the grave is a remarkable visual technique used in the movie to analyze traumatic loss. The importance of the grave is represented in revealing the truth behind Hamnet's death in which each grave contains the year of death. In 1596, "five children only were taken and three of those were new born's.

Not like in other plague years” (Elton 76). Therefore, the grave reveals that Hamnet did not die because of the plague.

6. Conclusion

As we have shown above, both of *Hamnet* novel and *All Is True* movie, the two different artistic mediums, have succeeded in analyzing traumatic loss thematically and technically. Hamnet is an important figure in English literature whose death inspired his father to write his most famous plays. Thus, the story of his death must be dignified and remembered. Although more than 400 years have passed since Hamnet's death, the story that Elton and O'Farrell fictionalize into their literary works is appropriate for every age to express about traumatic loss and to prove that reflection of trauma in literature is unavoidable.

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