Narrative Space of Redemption in Post 9/11 Fiction: Analysis of Heteroglossia and Chronotope in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

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Abstract
American Jewish novelist Jonathan Safran Foer told the traumatic story of an ordinary American family by deconstructing the indecipherable 9/11 events in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close. This article demonstrates how Foer echoes Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of chronotope through configuration of time and space in the text’s representation of counter-narratives and traumatic discourse. Reflecting on the nature of humanity and postmodern context, Foer expresses his longing for redemption by exploiting multilayered and meta-textual narrative structure to construct the sense of narrative space of redemption. Moreover, within the novel Foer reinforces diverse traumatic narratives through juxtaposing the post 9/11 event with the past traumas such as the Dresden bombing in World War II. The novel further demonstrates this Bakhtinian concept in the representation of language and physical spaces, since Foer proposes the redemptive myth that dialogical narration and epistolary writing can heal past traumatic experience although the traumatic past is inexpressible.

Keywords
counter-narrative; traumatic discourse; chronotope; dialogical narration; epistolary writing

Citation
I. Introduction
American Jewish novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, born in 1977, told the traumatic story of an ordinary American family by deconstructing the indecipherable 9/11 events in his second novel Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close after his first successful novel Everything is Illuminated published in 2002. September 11 is one of the largest subjects in the contemporary political landscape which exerts great repercussion on the western literary field. Many famous novelists such as Ian McEwen, Don DeLillo and John Updike engaged with the trauma of 9/11 and attempted to depict the post-9/11 social and personal landscape of trauma, grief and loss through engendering a new form of narrative realism that merges written and visual representation. Foer has followed their steps by delineating this heartbreaking historic 9/11 terrorist attack into his own literary territory.

Reflecting on the nature of humanity and the postmodern context, Foer expresses his longing for redemption by exploiting multilayered and meta-textual narrative structure to construct the sense of the narrative space of redemption. The implication of the novel’s title “Extremely Loud” has a thrilling resonance with the World Trade Center’s collapse in September 11, 2001. And just as “Incredibly Close” implied, it brought readers closer to an emotional reckoning with the day the terrorist attack happened.

II. Multilayered narrative structure and visual features
Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close focuses on the nine-year-old boy Oskar Schell who lost his father in the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. A year later, Oskar began his struggling and heroic exploration after he discovered a mysterious key with a word “Black” in an envelope in his father’s closet. He embarked on a quest to find the owner of the key through visiting all the people with the surname Black in New York City. This picaresque journey represents Oskar’s healing of the wound from his father’s abrupt death and his unassuaged grief since Oskar’s narrative progress permits him to work through trauma and eventually regain a strong sense of self-identity. Although Oskar displays many symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, such as insomnia, panic attacks, nightmares, numbness, melancholia and depression (Oskar-wear heavy boots when he is in depression).

On the other side, Oskar’s narration is interwoven with his grandparents’ perpetual melancholia. These two senior people are the victims of the Dresden firebombing in World War II. Foer juxtaposes the two cataclysmic events -- World War II atrocities and 9/11 terrorist attack in the composition of the novel through constructing a prominent narrative framing of trauma because he intends to demonstrate the current trauma through the screen of a previous historic narration.

The narrative structure in the novel virtually separates into two main lines: Oskar’s picaresque journey for the track of the key after 9/11, and his grandparents’ painful recollection of Dresden and their hanging-over of distressing sequela. Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close has many visual features which made it won the V&A2005 Book Illustration Award and won the reputation of what Booklist calls “undoubtedly the most beautiful and heartbreaking flip book in all of literature.”

Most part of the novel is designed in conventionalized block style with some visual elements, especially the higher imagistic designs, photographs, drawings and graphics which all intend to enhance and subvert verbal meaning as well as attempt to evoke reader’s emotional response through this kind of multisensory communication.

The new literary term that can best describe this novel is multimodal novel, which can apply to illustrate Foer’s experimentation in creating 9/11 literature with distinctive visual features. Foer himself firmly believes that the typography including the fonts and size of margins will be vital to impact readers’ evaluative reading process. Foer once clarified the reason why he prefers to use the visual experimentation in an interview: “September 11 had such a strong visual component, the most visually documented event in human history. Nothing’s ever been seen by as many people as that was. Our experiences of the day, our memories of the day are just so tied up in images of buildings falling and bodies falling.”

The author exhibits his favor of choosing a child’s perspective to examine violence because he thought: “Oskar is a kind of expression of that level of vulnerability or being exposed. I wasn’t playing any games. I just wanted to tell the story as forcefully as I could.”

III. Languages of Heteroglossia

Foer demonstrates trauma transfer in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close in two dimensions: on the nondiegetic-level, narrative structure, and on the diegetic level, focalization. The heteroglossia in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is unremitting, which is prominent on the nondiegetic-level. There are three narrators in the novel and each has distinctive narrative styles. Foer wittingly designs the typographical markings of type-face and type-setting to represent three narrative voices. Oskar is the central narrating character. His narrative chapters are characterized by standard and correct punctuation, which are interspersed with the episode narrated by his grandparents. Grandma’s chapters include blank pages and extended gaps, while Grandpa’s episodes are fragmented and short sentences without full stops.

Bakhtin writes that “such languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically.”

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3 Ibid.

Moreover, within the novel Foer reinforces diverse traumatic narratives through juxtaposing the post 9/11 event in the populated metropolitan city New York with the past traumas such as the Dresden bombing in World War II and the nuclear deconstruction of Hiroshima. There is no direct delineation of the catastrophic 9/11 events. Foer offers us the disaster through a brief glimpse of a TV screen, when grandparents sit before the screen which shows “The same pictures over and over. Planes going into buildings.”

Readers do not receive detailed account of the collapse building and Oskar’s father death. Notably, we do find an elaborate description of the Dresden firebombing. Foer deliberately withdraws the description of 9/11 event because he thought readers are too close to the new trauma. Consequently, Foer hopes to present the fictionalized 9/11 on a global scale and then ease the pervasive stress caused by the event. Dresden firebombing can serve as a crucial traumatic reference and a role to transfer the trauma by being linked with the events of New York. The new trauma comes into dialogic exchange with a previous trauma and forms an inter-traumatic dialogue. In a boarder semantic field of World War II atrocities, the Firebombing of Dresden and nuclear destruction of Hiroshima are the traumatic events haunting Foer’s consciousness in writing the 9/11 text.

In fictionalized traumatic narration, Foer utilizes many therapeutic discourses in the process of trauma healing; he makes the narrator expose the anxieties and contradictions concealed in the restatement of the experience of a traumatic event. In the fictional scenes, Oskar’s imaginative textual speech world in the opening paragraphs shares some structural and grammatical similarities. For instance, in the first chapter of the novel, the first paragraph begins with “What about a teakettle? What if the spout opened…” then the second paragraph follows the syntactical style of the first paragraph as “What about little microphones? What if everyone swallowed them…”. It is inevitable for readers to enter into the account of the imaginative text of Oskar’s account. Oskar’s extravagant invention plays a role of his personal desire to rewrite history. Hence he presumably assumes that his father does not lose his life in 9/11 terrorist attack.

Trauma theory proposes a solution to overcome the dissociation is to transfer the disjointed traumatic memory to a coherent narrative memory. Oskar just implements this solution into practice through visiting different people named Black and narrating his sad story of losing his father in the 9/11 event, which can also be considered as a trauma externalization through cyclic and multilateral dialogic narration. Oskar’s grandfather suffers from aphasia and is unable to share his traumatic experience. His radical refusal to talk about the past precludes his melancholia. His inexpiable hate towards the unrelenting obsession with his pre-traumatic past adds to the new traumatic event rooted in his mind, therefore he is deprived of the ability to forget. The dual traumas make him unable to express the incomprehensibility of trauma.

Another measure Oskar took to working through is by epistolary writing. He wrote many responsive letters and received others’ comforting words; whereas grandfather also wrote

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7 Ibid.p.13
letters but in the form of irresponsive letters that he did not send. Grandfather’s entrapment with the past makes his present torture. Oskar successfully releases his aggression and the outburst of his anger, which is just his process of “acting out” his trauma.

Readers will find that grandma perhaps behave much better as a survivor of the Dresden air raids than grandpa. She does stay trapped in the relentless past. She attempts to make a new life and has a momentum to communicate and articulate her own story. Grandma’s process of working through the traumatic past is through writing her life story feverishly, although she just types the word without insert paper. Her low self-esteem and self-loathing represent her traumatic suffering. Moreover, readers can find granny has bad eyesight. Her detachment and emotional numbness become the essential description of a post-traumatic state of mind. The initial impression of grandma’s reaction to terrorist attack is her conscious erosion of feeling and repression of memories. The memory of past trauma came back to haunt her in her dream. The internal suffering apparently represents her suicidal nature. She lost her son in 9/11 event, which strengthens her previous trauma of Dresden and of being abandoned by her husband as well as living a new life for her son--Oskar’s father.

IV. Chronotope in Trauma Narrative
Foer resonates with Bakhtin’s conception of chronotope through configuration of time and space in the text’s representation of counter-narratives and traumatic discourse. Bakhtin initiated the literary term chronotope in the book *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* in the chapter of “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” he defined chronotope as follows:

"the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely).”8

Readers can understand Foer’s work when they associate the reading process with the two main traumatic cities-New York and Dresden in both catastrophic events. Oskar’s picaresque journey can be regarded as a new type of chronotope—the chronotope of ordeal, which is symbolized as a ritual journey and final achievement of spiritual transformation and sublimation. Oskar’s heroic journey starts from the Sixth borough in New York City. This place is of paramount importance in his quest. Central Park can be viewed as a metaphor for the inescapability of growing up. He suffered from most PTSD symptoms and behaved overactive in thought and actions, which can be regarded as hyper-vigilance and symptoms of panic attacks.

“Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway(even though I’m not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops

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and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans."  

The elevators, subway, airplanes, tall buildings and all the other things mentioned above attach spatial connotation with 9/11 trauma for Oskar. Foer intentionally accentuates the interrelatedness between spatial and temporal aspects of trauma through demonstrating Oskar’s emotional and psychological change in the fiction. Trauma theory is featured with temporal rupture and a clear demarcation of events happened before or after. As a fictional text of 9/11 events, the novel can be regarded as a continuum in post 9/11 discourse. Foer’s treatment of trauma and deployment of chronotope of the two traumatic cities can be testified as an experiment to sketch out the relationship among time, space and trauma in this post 9/11 novel.

Additionally, one typical example that Bakhtin gives the explanation of chronotope as: “the chronotope of threshold. . . . The word "threshold" itself . . . is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over a threshold). In literature, the chronotope of the threshold is always metaphorical and symbolic, sometimes openly but more often implicitly.”

The chronotope of threshold in this novel is the breaking point of 9/11 event, it is the moment of crisis for the entire family, especially for Oskar as a kid. The metropolitan space of the novel broadens to two cities – Dresden and New York and also narrows to the interior rooms of the grandparents’ living space and all the Blacks’ homes. The spaces, places and territories in the two cities were labelled by inextricable traumas of the past and present.

The knowledge of readers in the discourse-world and their emotional responses to 9/11 will function as a significant role in the fictionalization. The recognition of the novel as a product and response to the psychological resolution of trauma is crucial in a cognitive-poetic approach. The reader who acts on Foer’s revelation and shifts from the first page to the last page can understand that Oskar ultimately works through his pain.

More importantly, Oskar’s narration naturally becomes the focalized point of readers’ experience. The heteroglottic structure of the novel makes readers compare Oskar’s experience with that of his grandparents. Oskar’s perspective can be regarded as paradigmatic for the fiction as a whole. Oskar’s trauma narration remains the primary frame for the traumatic experience of 9/11 event, which was juxtaposing by grandparents’ past-traumatic event of Dresden bombing. In grandma’s narrative section, readers get familiarized with her childhood life in Dresden in 1945 and her adulthood life in New York City. The chronotope of inside and outside of heart may have distinctly different meanings in the three protagonists.

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The ending part of the novel indicates Oskar’s reconciliation with his mother, who was depicted as indifferent with Oskar’s syndromes of PTSD. When his mother kisses him goodnight and says “I love you”, the incarnation of love naturally invites readers to understand Foer’s designation that love is a vehicle which can transfer trans-generational empathy. Readers can assume that this is just the message that Foer would like to deliver. Love can conquer all kinds of sufferings of generation through the act of dialogic communication, no matter in the way of speaking or writing.

V. Conclusion
The novel demonstrates the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia and chronotope in the representation of language and physical spaces, because Foer proposes the redemptive myth that dialogical narration and epistolary writing can heal past traumatic experience although the traumatic past is inexpressible. The victims suffer from typical melancholic trauma (grandfather) are unable or even refuse to talk about the past, in other words, they cannot transfer the traumatic memory into narrative memory. Grandma seems to behave much better than grandfather in coping with dual traumas. Oskar is the only character who shares his trauma with others and clearly works through his trauma through dialogic communication.

References


