

TRAUMA AND THE DIVIDED SELF IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

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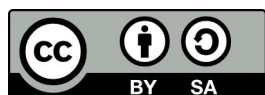
ABSTRACT

In post-9/11 fiction, trauma is often represented not merely as a psychological condition but as a narrative disruption that fragments the protagonist's sense of self. This article examines the representation of the divided self in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* through the lens of R.D. Laing's theory of the Divided Self. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how self-fragmentation and the construction of a false-self system dramatize the protagonist's inner conflict. The findings indicate that narrative elements, such as rigid communication patterns and the deployment of humor, function as a false-self system that serves as a defense mechanism against ontological insecurity. This study argues that the tragedy of 9/11 triggered a sharp separation between the inner self and the false self. Ultimately, the trauma in this novel manifests as a catalyst for a divided self that alienates inner feelings from their social representation, thereby trapping the protagonist in self-isolation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous literary works represent traumatic and stressful life events as complex narrative elements. In contemporary literary discourse, the 9/11 tragedy stands out as a pivotal traumatic event (Versluys, 2009), one that not only destroyed physical structures but also disrupted individuals' sense of ontological security, particularly among vulnerable groups such as children (Morales Eiguez, 2023). Depictions of post-9/11 life often show how characters negotiate personal grief within shifting socio-political expectations (Sadia & Khurshid, 2025). While previous research has examined social pressures in relation to gender and patriarchal structures (Walby, 1990) the pressures experienced by children in trauma narratives require a different analytical focus, particularly in relation to identity formation and emotional articulation. As Chen & Lau, (2021) suggest, identity pressure emerges when an individual's desires conflict with social expectations, often leading to an identity crisis in fictional representations. Thus, examining how trauma shapes a child's character is crucial for understanding both narrative development and psychological representation (Sweat, 2022).

Trauma in literary texts is often portrayed as an emotional wound that separates characters from their true feelings (Maslida & Wajiran, 2025). According to Caruth's (1996) theory of trauma, such experiences tend to reappear through narrative disruptions and intrusive memories. However, in child characters, trauma is not always expressed through direct articulation but through fragmented emotional responses and symbolic behavior (Lee et al., 2024). A child's inability to process grief frequently manifests as an internal conflict between emotional experience and its expression (Pan & Zhang, 2023). Under such conditions,



coping mechanisms may develop in the form of social performance, creating a division between the true self and the false self (Ferguson, 2021).

This phenomenon of fragmentation is clearly captured in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). Through the character of Oskar, who lost his father in the 9/11 tragedy, Foer depicts how large-scale traumatic events trigger inner conflict. Previous studies on this novel have primarily focused on trauma as memory, healing, and interpretation. For instance, Gligorić, (2020) examines how characters construct meaning from traumatic events, while Bouacida et al., (2023) analyze trauma through bodily expressions as a form of non-verbal narration. In addition, studies such as He, (2024) although conducted on *Falling Man*, the emphasis on emotional void and psychic collapse within the family as central response to trauma. These approaches tend to interpret trauma in terms of recovery processes, narrative memory, or familial breakdown, rather than examining the internal structure of the self.

Furthermore, several studies discuss Oskar's eccentric behavior, communication patterns, and emotional responses without employing a specific psychological framework that explains the division of the self. To address this gap, this study applies Laing's (1960) concept of the divided self to examine how self-fragmentation is represented through Oskar's narrative and behavior in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Rather than treating trauma as a purely psychological condition, this study focuses on how the text constructs the tension between the true self and the false self through narrative strategies, characterization, and symbolic actions. This study argues that Oskar's behavior should not be reduced to mere symptoms of trauma but should be read as a literary representation of a divided self, in which emotional vulnerability is mediated through performance, language, and imaginative expression. By doing so, this study offers a literary interpretation of trauma that emphasizes how inner conflict is articulated within the narrative form, rather than diagnosed as a psychological condition.

Divided self by Laing, (1960) provides a conceptual structure for analyzing the construction of the false self as it is presented in social interaction and the true self, which contains repressed emotional experience (Chawdhury, 2023). Based on this framework, this article aims to examine how traumatic events are represented as triggering self-fragmentation in child characters by analyzing: (1) narrative elements that construct the conditions of self-fragmentation, and (2) the representation of the false-self system as a form of performed identity that enables the character to maintain social existence after trauma.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in Laing's (1960) concept of the divided self, which is grounded in the idea of ontological security. Under normal circumstances, an individual possesses a deep sense of security regarding their existence as a real, whole, and living person. However, when a person experiences a highly traumatic event, such as the sudden loss of a protective figure in a major tragedy, this ontological security is shattered. Consequently, the individual falls into a state of ontological insecurity, where the outside world is no longer perceived as a stable place, but rather as a constant threat poised to destroy their sense of self-integrity (Schlembach, 2020).



As a defensive response to this sense of inner threat, Laing, (1960) explains that individuals create an internal split between the true self and the false self. The true self, which contains vulnerability and authentic identity, tends to withdraw inward or become isolated to avoid further wounding from painful experiences. Meanwhile, the false self emerges as a mask tasked with facing the demands of the social world. This false self often appears compliant, conforming to norms, or even employing mechanisms such as humor or rigid language to mask deep emotional distress. In post-traumatic conditions, individuals may exhibit unusual behaviors as part of the false self's effort to prevent the true self from being overwhelmed by a reality that exceeds their emotional capacity (Chawdhury, 2023).

In this study, the 9/11 tragedy in the novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is seen as the main trigger for the protagonist's self-fragmentation. Following Laing's (1960) perspective, such a traumatic event disrupts an individual's fundamental sense of security in the world. The loss experienced by the protagonist in this narrative is not merely a form of ordinary grief but an existential disruption that destabilizes his subjective reality. Thus, the context of trauma in this novel functions as a narrative element that destroys the integrity of identity, so that the protagonist no longer perceives his world as stable or safe to inhabit.

This self-fragmentation then leads to the emergence of a false-self system, which can be read as a form of performed identity that enables the character to continue functioning socially (Laing, 1960). Following the traumatic event, the character in this novel must adopt certain behaviors or actions that serve as a mask to cope with the demands of the surrounding environment. The manifestation of this false-self system is analyzed as an effort to protect a fragile inner self from the threat of destruction caused by intense emotional pressure. Through this approach, it becomes clear how external pressures in the story make the character divide the inner self to survive within society following the traumatic event.

Multiple prior studies have examined Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, with a primary focus on the impact of trauma, family relationships, and memory narratives. These studies highlight three dominant themes in the story. The first theme is the healing process and the manifestation of fictional trauma in the narrative (Gligorić, 2020; Ilaş, 2021; Bouacida et al., 2023). Gligorić, (2020) found that the main character, Oskar Schell, undergoes a trauma healing process that moves from the phase of reenacting the trauma or acting out toward the stage of acceptance or working through by embarking on an adventure to find a mysterious key. Ilaş, (2021) explains that trauma in this novel is conveyed through distinctive fictional elements, such as the use of visual media and photographs to represent unspoken feelings. Meanwhile, Bouacida et al., (2023) found that the failure of language to express trauma causes these inner wounds to shift into a bodily representation, where the characters' emotions manifest through physical and sensory reactions.

The second theme is the redefinition of the concept of family in coming-of-age narratives (Namiki, 2020). Namiki found that although the protagonist, Oskar, embarks on a search for his dead father, this process leads him to reconstruct his relationship with his mother and reinterpret the structure of the family within the *Bildungsroman* genre. The third theme is the widespread impact of the 9/11 trauma in other literary works (He, 2024). In his study of the novel *Falling Man*, He, (2024) identified the theme of redemption as a way for



characters to cope with the psychological burden following the terrorist attacks. This study demonstrates that the trauma of 9/11 is a consistently explored topic in contemporary literature for examining representations of human psychological distress.

Although these studies have examined Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* from the perspectives of recovery, bodily representation, and the role of the family, their analyses primarily focus on external manifestations of trauma, such as memory reconstruction and narrative expression. Previous research tends to view trauma as a problem of communication or collective memory, which limits the analysis to how trauma is expressed rather than how it structures the character's sense of self. Therefore, the internal division between the true self and the false self remains underexplored. By utilizing Laing's (1960) concept of the divided self, this study reorients the analysis toward the representation of self-fragmentation, demonstrating that the protagonist's unique behavior can be interpreted as a performed identity that negotiates between inner vulnerability and external demands.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a focus on textual analysis. It also relies on a literature review to enhance contextual understanding and discussion. The primary data sources in this study are selected passages in the form of quotations, dialogues, and internal monologues from Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The data were selected based on their relevance to moments of emotional tension, narrative disruption, and behavioral patterns that indicate a division between the character's internal experience and external expression. In the process, the author acts as the primary instrument conducting a systematic close reading by identifying, categorizing, and interpreting textual evidence related to self-fragmentation within the narrative.

The theoretical framework applied in this analysis is Laing's (1960) concept of the divided self. This theory is used not as a clinical diagnosis but as an analytical tool to interpret how the novel represents the tension between the true self and the false self through narrative strategies, characterization, and symbolic actions. The analytical procedure involves three stages: (1) identifying passages that reflect emotional pressure and instability, (2) analyzing how these passages construct a division between inner experience and outward behavior, and (3) interpreting these findings through the lens of Laing's concept of the divided self. Through this step-by-step analysis, the reading becomes systematic, as each selected passage is examined in relation to specific theoretical concepts rather than through general interpretation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study argues that traumatic events such as the 9/11 tragedy are narratively constructed to produce self-fragmentation through unresolved emotional tension depicted in the text. The concept of self-fragmentation, as defined by Laing, (1960), refers to a form of inner division associated with alienation, which is represented by Foer through the narrative in the novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Rather than indicating a literal withdrawal from reality, Oskar's alienation is constructed through narrative patterns that reveal a division between his true self and false self. Laing, (1960) describes the condition as a disconnection from both one's true feelings and the external world. In the novel, this condition emerges not simply



from emotional loss but from the collapse of ontological security, which destabilizes the character's sense of self and compels a division between the true self and the false self.

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, these dynamics are reflected through the literary portrayal of Oskar, who struggles to process loss after the 9/11 tragedy. Trauma in the novel is therefore represented not as a single moment of suffering, but as an ongoing condition that continuously reshapes the character's inner experience. This ongoing tension intensifies the division between his true self and his false self, revealing his attempt to preserve a sense of stability in a disrupted world.

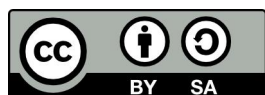
4.1 "Everything was Incredibly Far Away from Me..."

Traumatic events involving massive loss, such as the 9/11 attacks, can destabilize an individual's sense of security and continuity. From Laing's perspective, this disruption causes ontological insecurity, which blurs the boundary between internal feelings and external reality. The immediate implication after a traumatic event is confusion in processing sudden loss, which creates indefinable feelings. Similar to what Oskar experienced after receiving the news of his father's death. This is reflected in Oskar's narrative, which reveals his inability to identify his own emotions, an early sign of the fragmentation of his inner self:

Another reason it would be a good invention is that there are so many times when you know you're feeling a lot of something, but you don't know what the something is. Am I frustrated? Am I actually just panicky? (213)

The quote illustrates a moment in which the character is unable to clearly articulate his internal state, as intense emotions are experienced but remain undefined. The questions "Am I frustrated? Am I actually just panicky?" indicate a fragmentation of emotional recognition, where the character struggles to distinguish and interpret his feelings. This suggests that trauma is represented not only through what is felt, but through the inability to name and organize that experience. Oskar's inability to understand what he feels symbolizes a disruption in emotional coherence within the narrative, where feelings do not emerge as clearly defined categories such as sadness or fear, but as a mixture of conflicting emotional pressures. His desire to create "invention" can be read as a literary attempt to rational structure on an otherwise disordered emotional experience, while also indicating the growing distance between his inner self and the external world.

This condition is further developed through Oskar's increasing sense of ontological insecurity. Oskar's sense of insecurity emerges after the sudden loss of his father, whose presence previously functioned as a source of emotional stability and safety. As discussed by Namiki, (2020), Oskar appears both innocent and mature; however, this study suggests that such a portrayal reflects a fragmented perception of reality constructed through narrative elements such as objects, visual images, and traumatic flashbacks. This inner conflict arises because Foer portrays Oskar as intellectually capable of recognizing the instability of his world, yet emotionally unprepared to process it. Consequently, he becomes increasingly fixated on collecting fragments of reality, which can be interpreted as a symbolic attempt to reconstruct coherence within his fragmented self.



This condition of self-fragmentation is further intensified by the narrative depiction of limited emotional support surrounding Oskar. Emotional support plays a crucial role in helping individuals process loss and manage their emotional distress. Unfortunately, in Oskar's case, the narrative portrays Oskar as feeling alienated, as reflected in his statement: "Mom isn't good at helping me" (24). This absence of adequate emotional response contributes to the collapse of a relational space in which the true self could be safely expressed, leaving Oskar no place to express his sadness and fears. Within Laing's (1960) framework, this condition accelerates the isolation of the true self and reinforces the emergence of the false self as a defense mechanism. Further evidence appears in his statement, "I could tell that she didn't really love me," (18), which should be read not as an objective claim, but as a subjective perception shaped by emotional disconnection following trauma. Together with the metaphor "zipping up the sleeping bag of myself," (18) this perception reflects a narrative movement toward alienation, in which Oskar increasingly relies on the false self when a sense of emotional safety is no longer available.

The absence of a safe emotional space subsequently deepens Oskar's ontological insecurity, reinforcing the fragmentation of his sense of self. This division leaves Oskar in a fragile existential state, feeling that the reality of the world is extremely far from him, as he describes his feelings "like I was in the middle of a huge black ocean, or in deep space, but not in the fascinating way. It's just that everything was incredibly far away from me." (52). This imagery signifies a disconnection between the inner self and the external world, representing a psychological gap between internal experience and external reality. Such a reflects the condition of ontological insecurity described by Laing, (1960), in which the individual experiences the world as unstable and threatening. Therefore, Oskar's inner self is not integrated with external reality, making him view the world as something distant, strange, and not fully accessible.

Laing, (1960) explains that individuals experiencing ontological insecurity often feel detached from their own existence, as if they are no longer fully present in the world. The metaphor of being surrounded by a "black sea" and feeling that everything is "incredibly far away" illustrates a state of self-fragmentation in which the continuity of the self is disrupted, as further emphasized in Oskar's statement, "My insides don't match up with my outsides." (260). Within this framework, self-fragmentation leads to a condition of alienation, in which the true self withdraws while the false self manages outward interaction. Furthermore, this sense of alienation marks the initial separation between inner feelings and external reality. Oskar no longer experiences the world directly, but instead as something distorted and distant. This condition corresponds with Laing's concept that a fragmented self divides itself into a part that experiences fear and another part that distances itself from that experience. This situation is aligned with Laing's concept that the fragmented self divides itself into a part that experiences fear and another part that distances itself from the experience.

4.2 Hiding Suffering behind Laughter

According to Laing, (1960), individuals experiencing self-fragmentation may develop a false-self system as a way to sustain social interaction. The false self functions as a protective layer that allows individuals to engage with others without exposing their vulnerable inner state.



This mechanism is reflected in Oskar's statement, "I'm gonna bury my feelings deep inside me" (263) which represents a conscious effort to separate inner emotional experience from outward expression. In this sense, the externally presented self is not an authentic reflection of feelings, but a constructed performance shaped by the need to regulate emotional exposure.

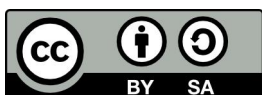
One of the most significant manifestations of Oskar's false-self system is his tendency to use humor in an inappropriate situation. His grandmother observes, "You made jokes with the driver, but I could see that inside you were suffering. Making him laugh was how you suffered." (297). In this context, humor is not represented as genuine amusement, but as a narrative strategy that masks emotional distress. The act of making others laugh during moments of grief indicates a displacement of inner suffering into socially acceptable behavior, allowing Oskar to maintain interaction without revealing vulnerability. This is further reinforced in Oskar's statement, "I don't know, maybe I'll try not to ruin things by getting so emotional." (262), which suggests that emotional expression is perceived as disruptive. Thus, humor operates as a form of performed identity through which Oskar negotiates between his inner distress and external expectations. While Chen & Lau, (2021), associate such behavior with social pressure, this study emphasizes that, in Oskar's case, humor emerges specifically as a response to trauma, functioning as a key mechanism of the false self rather than a peripheral character trait.

This pattern of the false self is further extended beyond humor into Oskar's modes of communication and expression. Oskar's alienation from himself is also evident in the way he builds social relationships, particularly through rigid and highly controlled communication patterns, as seen in his introductions. "Greetings. Gerald. I. Am. Oskar." (15). This unnatural way of speaking disrupts the flow of spontaneous interaction and suggests a deliberately constructed form of outward expression rather than natural communication. From Laing's (1960) perspective, such distorted language reflects an increasing separation between the true self and its outward expression. Furthermore, since his father's death, Oskar has begun writing letters as an alternative form of inner self-expression. He employs metaphors such as "made my boots lighter" (24) to describe moments of emotional relief. This metaphor suggests that emotions that cannot be expressed verbally are transformed into symbolic language (Schreurs, 2023). This symbolic expression serves as a safe space for the inner self to remain present without having to face the outside world, which is perceived as threatening. This pattern suggests that Oskar's emotional expressions more often emerge in indirect forms, reinforcing the idea that self-fragmentation is sustained through narrative strategies that separate the true self from its outward expression.

4.3 Divided Self: When The World is No Longer Quiet

The emergence of the false-self system in Oskar's behavior can be further understood by examining the loss of emotional security that previously grounded his sense of self. Oskar's emotional bond with his father was an important foundation for his sense of security and emotional stability before the traumatic event occurred. As stated in his statement:

I loved having a dad who was smarter than the New York Times, and I loved how my cheek could feel the hairs on his chest through his T-shirt, and how he always smelled



like shaving, even at the end of the day. Being with him made my brain quiet. I didn't have to invent a thing. (26)

The quote emphasizes that Oskar's father is narratively positioned as a central figure through whom a sense of security is constructed, serving as a space where he can feel safe without having to think or be defensive. A safe zone he experiences in his father's presence is represented as a state of ontological security, suggesting a moment in which the narrative suspends tension and instability. Details such as touch, smell, and his father's habits function as concrete narrative elements that construct a strong bond within the family. Furthermore, his father's presence also demonstrates how the narrative has not yet been disrupted, as there is still alignment between the true self and the false self, allowing Oskar to exist without fragmentation. When this figure is gone, that stability collapses, disrupting the alignment and exposing the self to fragmentation. Thus, in traumatic situations, the narrative illustrates how the loss of ontological security leads to self-fragmentation within the character's internal structure.

According to Laing, (1960), every individual possesses the potential to experience self-fragmentation; the distinction lies in whether an individual maintains ontological security or becomes divided into a true self and a false self. This division manifests as a structural split, where the true self tends to hide, while the false self interacts with the external world. Rather than functioning as a whole self, the self becomes divided into two modes of existence, where authentic feeling is concealed and replaced by controlled outward expression. This condition indicates that the true self, shaped by trauma, cannot be directly expressed, as such expression is perceived as a threat to ontological security.

In Oskar's case, one of the factors that prompts the emergence of the false self is the overwhelming of multiple emotional states, as evidenced by his statement, "Right now I'm feeling sadness, happiness, anger, love, guilt, joy, shame, and a little bit of humor..." (259). This illustrates the complexity of overlapping emotions without a safe space to process them, resulting in incomplete expressions. Instead of honestly expressing his sadness or fear, he produces a controlled outward expression that is perceived as socially acceptable. The humor he mentioned at the end of his statement functions not merely as a light-hearted touch but as a narrative strategy to mask his inner conflict. Thus, the false operates as a protective structure, while his true self, filled with confusion and emotional wounds, remains withdrawn. He states:

No matter how much I feel, I'm not going to let it out. If I have to cry, I'm gonna cry on the inside... It just makes everyone's life worse. (263)

The statement represents a shift in the narrative logic of emotional expression, in which feelings are no longer articulated but contained. Within Laing's framework, the choice to "cry on the inside" signifies a conscious retreat of the true self from the relational space. At this stage, the false self no longer simply regulates expression, but begins to govern the terms under which emotion can or cannot appear within the narrative. Rather than presenting emotion as communicative, the text constructs it as potentially disruptive, leading Oskar to



internalize his responses. This condition illustrates how the false self increasingly controls the boundary between inner experience and outward expression, while the true self remains isolated, intensifying the division between Oskar and the external world.

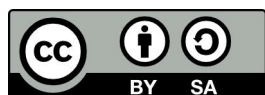
Such a pattern is also seen when Oskar argues with his mother. He says, "I tried to think of some way to be hilarious, because I thought that maybe if I was hilarious, she wouldn't be mad at me anymore, and I could be safe again." (220). This quote suggests that Oskar suppresses his true feelings and redirects interaction through controlled behavior in order to maintain a sense of security. Here, the false self functions as a relational strategy that redirects emotional tension into socially acceptable interaction, allowing Oskar to stabilize situations that might otherwise threaten him. This pattern suggests that, for Oskar, emotional honesty becomes incompatible with relational safety, so expression is replaced by performance.

The separation between Oskar's true self and false self demonstrates that trauma reconfigures the internal structure of the self as represented in the narrative. In contrast to Gligorić, (2020), who focuses on trauma as a developmental process through acting out and working through, this study emphasizes the structural division produced by trauma. While his analysis examines whether Oskar successfully processes trauma over time, the present study highlights how trauma produces a sustained condition of self-fragmentation that leads to self-alienation. This study argues that behaviors such as metaphor, humor, and rigid communication patterns serve as elements of narrative disruption that trigger self-fragmentation. Accordingly, these behaviors, such as the use of metaphors, humor, and rigid communication patterns, are not merely random traits but are systematic narrative patterns that trace the shifting operations of the false self across different contexts of expression.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that self-fragmentation in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is not merely a psychological reaction to grief, but a narrative construction of an existential struggle to survive. First, regarding the narrative elements that represent the triggers of self-fragmentation, this study argues that the collapse of ontological security is the primary factor. The father's death signifies more than a loss; it represents the dissolution of the character's internal cohesion, effectively triggering a self-fragmentation that destabilizes his entire worldview. Narrative elements such as the lack of emotional validation from the family and communication problems can accelerate the protagonist's process of self-alienation. This failure of emotional communication causes the character to isolate his true self from a reality that is perceived as threatening and non-validating, leading to profound self-alienation.

Secondly, this study shows that the false-self system manifests as a defense mechanism designed to protect social existence. Instead of showing authentic pain, Oskar dramatizes his defense through rigid behaviors, such as the inappropriate use of humor, the use of metaphors to express his true feelings, and his rigid way of talking. This false self serves as a shield that allows Oskar to continue interacting with the outside world while his true self remains hidden and protected within his emotional isolation. In terms of its contribution to literary studies, this study invites the reader to see that narrative disruptions and "strange" character behaviors are often textual signs of a fragmented self. Oskar's experience proves that the novel is capable of illustrating complex social phenomena like trauma and alienation through the lens of self-fragmentation. The self-fragmentation experienced by Oskar demonstrates that trauma



does not always manifest as explicit sadness, but is often hidden behind a social performance that appears normal yet is fragmented. Through this character, the novel illustrates how traumatic events fundamentally alter a person's inner structure and the way that individual perceives the world.

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