

**الصدمة المنتقلة عبر الأجيال في روايه الكاتبه ماغي
اوفارل اليد التي امسكت بي**

**The Transgenerational Trauma in Maggie
O'Farell's novel The Hand That First Held
Mine**

سارة عبد القادر حمودي

Sarah Abdulqader Hamoodi

جامعة سامراء | قسم اللغة الانكليزية

University of Samarra / Department of English

E-mail: eduhm250199@stu.uosamarra.edu.iq

ا. م . د . عفاف حافظ شاكر

Afaf Hafedh Shakir

E-mail: afaf.h19@uosamarra.edu.iq

جامعة سامراء | قسم اللغة الانكليزية

University of Samarra / Department of English

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الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث رواية *The Hand That First Held Mine* (٢٠١٠) بوصفها نصًا يُصوّر الصدمة النفسية كتجربة زمنية ممتدة لا تقتصر على لحظة الحدث، بل تتشكل من خلال تفاعل الجسد والذاكرة والعلاقات، وتُعاد داخل البنى العائلية. يعتمد البحث المنهج التحليلي النصي القائم على النقد التحليلي النفسي ومفاهيم نظرية الصدمة، بهدف تحليل كيفية انتقال الصدمة من الأم ليكسي إلى الابن تيد.

يركز التحليل على تتبع البنى السردية والدلالية التي تكشف الأثر الكامن للصدمة، ولا سيما الصمت، والإزاحة، والمحو، وإعادة بناء الماضي ضمن الخطاب العائلي. ويبين البحث أن الصدمة في الرواية لا تُقدّم بوصفها حالة فردية فحسب، بل كبنية علائقية وانتقالية تُنقل عبر المحو الرمزي للأصل، واستبدال الهوية الأمومية، وفرض سردية بديلة تُقصي الأم من اللغة والذاكرة اليومية، مما يحوّل التجربة إلى بنية لاواعية تظهر لاحقًا في صورة قلق مرضي وخوف من فقدان.

كما يوضح البحث أن تجربة تيد مع الأبوة تعمل كمحفّز لاواعي يستدعي صدمة الطفولة المبكرة المرتبطة بفقدان الأم ومحو الأصل، بحيث تعود الصدمة في شكل استجابة جسدية ونفسية بدلًا من كونها ذاكرة سردية مباشرة.

Abstract

This research examines the novel *The Hand That First Held Mine* (2010), as a text that depicts psychological trauma as an extended temporal experience that is not limited to the moment of the event, but is shaped by the interaction of the body, memory, and relationships, and is repeated within family structures. The research adopts the textual analytical approach based on psychoanalytic critique and concepts from trauma theory, in order to analyze how trauma is transmitted from the mother Lexie to the son Ted.

The analysis focuses on tracing narrative and semantic structures that reveal the underlying impact of trauma, particularly silence, displacement, erasure, and reconstruction of the past within family discourse. The research shows that trauma in the novel is presented not only as an individual case, but as a relational and transitional structure that is transmitted through the symbolic erasure of the original, replacing maternal identity, and imposing an alternative narrative that excludes the



mother from language and everyday memory, thus transforming the experience into an unconscious structure that later appears in the form of pathological anxiety and fear of loss. The research also shows that Ted's experience with fatherhood acts as an unconscious trigger that calls for early childhood trauma associated with the loss of the mother and the erasure of the original, so that the trauma returns in the form of a physical and psychological response rather than a direct narrative memory.

Trauma studies have witnessed clear development in recent decades, as trauma is no longer understood only as an individual experience linked to a past moment of pain, but rather is studied as a psychological and temporal effect that may persist within family relationships and be transmitted across generations. From this perspective, the concept of transgenerational trauma has emerged as an important framework for understanding how untreated pain persists within the family and subsequently manifests in the next generation through anxiety, silence, emotional distress, and the lack of a clear explanation for the suffering. In narrative fiction, this trauma does not always appear through direct recognition or clear retrieval of the event, but may manifest itself through narrative gaps, family silence, identity disorder, and the erasure of some past facts from family discourse.

Maggie O'Farrell's novel *The Hand That First Held Mine* provides an important example of this type of narrative representation, revealing that trauma does not remain confined to one generation, but can be transmitted from mother to son through indirect psychological and emotional pathways. The novel depicts trauma as an extended effect that is reproduced within the family, particularly through silence, the obliteration of certain facts, the absence of maternal origin, and the reshaping of family memory in a way that makes the son affected by a past that he did not live directly, but which carries its psychological consequences.

The research gap in this study stems from the fact that many previous studies of Maggie O'Farrell's work have focused on topics such as identity, motherhood, memory, and family relationships, while the issue of the transgenerational Trauma in *The Hand That First Held Mine* has not received sufficient critical attention, particularly regarding how trauma is transmitted from mother to son. Therefore, this study seeks to address this deficiency by providing a reading that focuses directly on the representation of transgenerational trauma in this novel.

Based on this, the main research question is: How is transgenic Trauma presented in *The Hand That First Held Mine*, and how is it transmitted from mother to son? This question stems from an interest in revealing the narrative and psychological mechanisms that cause trauma to persist within the family structure and appear in the son's life as an indirect effect of a previous past.



The contribution of this study to literary trauma scholarship is that it does not read the novel solely from the perspective of individual trauma, but rather presents it as a text that depicts trauma as a transgenerational experience passed down within the family from mother to son. The study also provides a reading that shows that the novel links the narrative structure with the psychological structure in representing the persistence of pain. This adds a perspective that focuses on Transgenerational Trauma as a key focus in understanding the novel. Hence, this study contributes to expanding the field of critical studies related to the works of Maggie O'Farrell, and adds to Trauma's studies a reading that shows how the novel can represent trauma not as an individual, finished event, but rather as a continuous impact that is transmitted within family relationships across generations.(Craps,2013).

1.2 Theatrical Frame work

In reading *The Hand That First Held Mine*, this research relied on trauma theory as the main theoretical framework, particularly the concept presented by Cathy Caruth in the book *Unclaimed Experience (1996)*, which believes that trauma is not just an event that occurred in the past, but rather an experience that is not fully absorbed at the moment of its occurrence, and then returns later in the form of repetition, interruption, fragmentation, and disturbance in perception.

The importance of this concept in this research stems from the fact that it helps to read trauma in the novel as a delayed effect that appears in the present, rather than as a clear and complete memory. Within this framework, Ted's experience is read as an example of early trauma that was not understood at the time of its occurrence, and later returned in the form of anxiety, collapse, and intermittent physical and psychological responses. In addition to this basic framework, the research leverages the concept of Transgenerational Trauma to understand how trauma is transmitted from mother to son.

The aim of the study is not only to analyze trauma as an individual experience, but also to show how it is repeated within the family structure and transmitted from one generation to another. In this context, the shock in the novel is not transmitted through a direct account of the past, but rather through silence and the absence of the full truth, Reshaping the family story in a way that excludes the maternal origin and leaves a lasting psychological impact on the son. Therefore, the theoretical framework in

this study is based primarily on combining Caruth's understanding of the nature of deferred trauma, and the Transgenerational Trauma's understanding as trauma transmitted within family relationships through indirect patterns. In order not to overlap theoretical concepts, this research distinguishes between a number of supporting frameworks. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012) helps explain how the next generation is affected by experiences they did not live directly, through family photos, narratives, voids, and traces of the past. However, this research does not treat Ted's case as just postmemory, because what he receives is not a clear memory or a transmitted story, but rather a confusing effect resulting from the mother's absence and rewriting the past. Therefore, the concept of postmemory is used here as a complementary concept to understanding the impact of the un-lived past, not as the main interpretive framework for the novel.

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's concept of Psychic Crypt and Phantom in *The Shell and The Kernel* (1994) also helps explain what happens when loss is not acknowledged, allowed to be told, or grieved. When the maternal origin is replaced by an alternative narrative, the loss does not turn into a memory integrated within the identity, but rather remains buried in a silent psychological structure, and then returns later in the form of anxiety, turmoil, and emotional repetition that finds no conscious explanation. This perception is directly linked to an important narrative mechanism in the novel, which is erasure, because excluding the mother from the family story does not erase the trauma, but rather pushes her to act from within as a hidden and continuous presence.

The testimony of what is understood by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *the testimony: Crises of Testimony in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), by Claudia Welz in *the testimony of trauma, memory, and testimony* (2016), is used in this study to lead him to believe that trauma is not placed or integrated into identity when there is a renewal of a fence for saying and confessing. Hence, the importance of this concept in analyzing the novel does not lie in its being an independent framework, but rather in explaining why the trauma in *The Hand That First Held Mine* persists as long as the original truth is not recognized within the family discourse. Absence of speech does not mean absence of impact, but rather means the return of trauma in non-linguistic forms such as panic, collapse,



and emotional confusion. Here, the concept of testimony is linked to a clear narrative mechanism: postponement of disclosure, lack of recognition, and continued silence within the family.

The physical dimension of trauma is explained by Bessel van der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), who shows that early trauma may not be stored as clear narrative memory, but rather in sensory and nervous systems that cause it to return later as a sense of danger, physical collapse, or intermittent flashes. This perception contributes to explaining some of Ted's responses in the novel, because his return to the past does not occur through organized recollection, but rather through sudden sensory and psychological responses that reveal that the body retains what consciousness could not formulate into words. In her studies, including *Biological Factors Associated with Susceptibility to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2001) and *Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects* (2018), Rachel Yehuda also adds an important dimension related to the possibility of the trauma effect persisting across stress and physical response systems. However, this research does not adopt biological trauma transmission as the main theoretical framework, but rather employs it as an explanatory dimension that helps understand how the effect of trauma on the body and emotion appears. This means that this research clearly distinguishes between these concepts.

This framework is also reinforced by Sigmund Freud's conceptions, particularly in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and *Studies on Hysteria* Breuer & Freud (1895), which show that untreated loss does not disappear, but remains active within the psyche in the form of an internal disturbance that later returns through repression, anxiety, and emotional breakdown. This insight is useful in this research because it helps explain how trauma in *The Hand That First Held Mine* does not remain confined to the original event, Rather, it continues to be described as an incompletely processed psychological effect, which subsequently appears in indirect emotional and psychological responses, particularly in relation to loss, attachment, and repetition.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma theory explains the nature of trauma as a delayed and incomplete experience. Translational trauma explains how this effect is transmitted from one generation to the next. Postmemory explains the effect of the un-lived past on the next generation. Testimony explains the importance of confession and speech in breaking

the continuity of trauma. Biological trauma transmission explains the physical and neurological effect of trauma. Hence, this study does not place these concepts on one level, but rather uses them within a gradual theoretical structure whose main center is trauma theory and transgenerational trauma, while the rest of the concepts serve as supporting tools for explaining specific mechanisms within the novel.

Accordingly, the research links these theoretical frameworks to a number of narrative mechanisms evident in *The Hand That First Held Mine*, such as familial silence, the obliteration of maternal origin, the rewriting of the past, the disconnect between experience and language, and the return of the effect in the form of anxiety, breakdown, and physical response. Thus, the novel does not present trauma as a past event with complete boundaries, but rather as an extended structure that is built narratively through absence, transmitted through family relationships, and then appears later in the son as a psychological and physical effect of a past that is not fully understood or recognized.

1.3. Literary Analysis

This study is based on Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, particularly as presented in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) to understand trauma as an experience that is not fully absorbed at the moment of its occurrence, but returns later in intermittent and delayed forms, making use of Sigmund Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) to explain the disruption of mourning and repression. From Bessel van der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) to read The Return of Trauma Through the Body, From Donald Winnicott in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (1965) to understand maternal attachment as a defensive response against loss. On this basis, the analysis is not limited to explaining Lexie's psychological state, but also focuses on how *The Hand That First Held Mine* represents trauma through temporal displacement, delayed disclosure, silence, and focalization that presents experience through fragments and partial emotions rather than through stable and complete knowledge.

The founding trauma in Lexie's life begins with the death of Innes, but the novel does not present this loss as a final event, but rather as an ongoing wound that reshapes time and consciousness. In her saying: "That Innes, the love of her life, had died alone: this, Lexie would never get over.



That she had been sleeping, across the city, in their bed, at the time he drew his last breath.” (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 185). Loss appears coupled with guilt and helplessness, which is consistent with Freud, who believes that mourning is disturbed when loss is coupled with an inner sense of responsibility, so that the lost subject does not turn into a finished memory, but rather into a permanent psychological presence. This scene is also aligned with Caruth, because the intensity of the shock does not lie only in death itself, but in the fact that the self does not absorb it at the moment, so it returns later as a recurring and open effect. This effect is embodied in the novel's representation of traumatic time. After Innes' death, time does not move towards recovery, but rather becomes disrupted and becomes an empty extension, as the novel says: “The time after Innes died was for Lexie an endless trail of days, blank hours... a time marked by absence.” (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 215). Here, the novel does not describe ordinary sadness, but rather constructs narratively what Trauma Theory emphasizes about Traumatic Time as a non-linear time in which the past returns within the present as a continuous absence.

The impact of the shock is also evident in Lexie's silence towards Innes, as the novel says: e never spoke of Innes to anyone. If Laurence cited him, Lexie would not reply.” (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 226). This silence is not understood as evidence of overcoming loss, but rather as a sign of language's inability to comprehend traumatic experience. This is consistent with Cathy Caruth's argument in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), in which she argues that trauma is not fully comprehended at the moment it occurs, it resists being transformed into direct, coherent discourse and appears instead through interruption, delay, and absence. Therefore, Lexie's trauma in the novel is not constructed through confession, but rather through deletion, silence, and the indirect presence of memory, which makes the narrative emptiness itself indicative of trauma.

When life betrays her again by Felix, the novel presents it not as a separate new incident, but as a reactivation of an older wound that has not healed. The scene is not explained directly, but is presented through a delayed emotional and behavioral explosion, this can be alined with Freud's understanding of the return of the repressed, and with Caruth's conception of the return of trauma in later signs rather than appearing as a complete memory. Here, focalization plays an important role, because the

reader does not receive the experience from outside, but rather approaches it through the tension of perception and emotion, which makes the psychological rupture part of the form of the narrative itself.

This structure culminates in birth scene, where the novel says “ She is still crouched on the floor when she gives birth. They have to catch the baby in a towel. The doctor says he’s never seen the like. Like a savage, he says, or an animal.” (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 232). From Caruth's perspective, this scene reveals the inability of language and consciousness to contain the experience, with trauma manifesting as a physical and behavioral disconnect. This also aligned with Bessel van der Kolk in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*(2014). Who believes that early trauma may return through the body rather than through organized narrative memory, and thus the body in the novel becomes a carrier of unspoken memory. Lexie's intense attachment to Theo after giving birth seems not just a maternal emotion, but a defensive response against repeated loss.

When she insists on keeping him close to her, this can be read in the light of Donald Winnicott, in his book *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* who links a healthy mother-child relationship with a gradual transition from containment to separation. Here, the constant attachment to the child reveals that motherhood itself was formed under the pressure of trauma, and that the fear of loss became part of the relationship structure. Therefore, the novel paves the way from an early age for the transmission of the impact of trauma from mother to son, not as a direct memory. Rather, it is a psychological and emotional climate that forms within excessive proximity and constant fear of interruption.

Thus, *The Hand That First Held Mine* represents trauma not only through the event, but also through the narrative form: disrupted time, silence, delayed revelation, and partial vision. Through these mechanisms, Lexie trauma transforms from an individual loss into a temporal and psychological structure that paves the way for the transmission of the effect to the next generation.

١,٣,١ Transgenerational Trauma between Mother and son

The first trauma in Theo's life is shaped not as a tellable linguistic memory, but as a direct sensory experience of loss. The child does not receive news of his mother's death through symbolic interpretation or psychological containment, but rather sees her body being extracted from the sea before he is given any linguistic framework to understand what



happened: “A boat is rounding the tip of the Cobb... a shape crumpled at the bottom of the boat, half covered with tarpaulin... take the child, take him away.” (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 314)

At this moment the child is not told that his mother “died”, nor is he allowed to name what he sees; what is stored in the memory is not an understandable event, but a raw shock without linguistic meaning. Here trauma begins as a gap between sensation and interpretation. The impact is exacerbated when this loss is prevented from turning into mourning or narration. Immediately after the accident, Theo is moved to a new home, and his life is reorganized under a different name, mother, and identity, without being given the right to ask or grieve. However, the novel reveals the failure of this silence through his repeated questions: “Where’s Mama?” (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 312) The question does not inquire about death, but about place; which means that absence was not understood as final, but remained suspended in time, as a possibility of return that was not closed. Imposing silence here does not erase the shock, but rather freezes it.

This pattern can be understood in light of what Nicolas Abraham & Maria Torok puts forward in *The Shell and The Kernel* (1994) about the “psychological grave” (psychic crypt), where unacknowledged loss turns into a structure buried within the self. In Theo's case, the mother's death did not turn into a mergeable memory, but was buried as an unnamed moment, only to return later in the form of constant anxiety and pathological fear of losing.

It's just silence, it extends to rewriting the past. Margot does not give him space to preserve his own memories, but rather provides him with a series of ready-made “memories” that retell his childhood in an alternative way: “Remember that beach where you rode a donkey? ... Remember?” (O’Farrell, 2010, pp. 37–38)

The child nods in agreement, but the novel makes it clear that these images are not actually related to him, but rather resemble repeated tourist shots that have replaced the original experience. Here we can use what Marianne Hirsch explains in *Family Frames* (1997) that family memory may be built through recurring narratives and images that reshape the past within the family framework. However, what happens in the case of Theo

goes beyond “subsequent memory” to become a complete replacement of lived experience with an imposed representation.

Thus, The effects of trauma are not just about memory and anxiety, but extend to the formation of Theo/Ted's narrative identity itself. Replacing the name from Theo to Ted, replacing the original mother with a surrogate mother, and imposing a ready-made story about childhood all make the self form over an erased origin and an incomplete story. So Ted doesn't just live in an old loss, he lives inside a fractured narrative identity, built on a gap between what his body has experienced and what he's been allowed to know about himself. Hence, the transmission of trauma from mother to son does not occur through the event alone, but rather through the reshaping of identity and family narrative together.

١,٣,٢ The impact of fatherhood

When Ted becomes a father and his wife enters the experience of childbirth, fear returns strongly not as a clear memory but as a physical feeling of threat, as if the danger of losing “the mother” is repeated this time through the wife. The novel describes the moment of birth as Ted's “familiar” death: “She’d almost died right there in the front of their all... He’d felt death in the room, like a cloud gathering itself somewhere up near the coming, and its presentation felt particularly familiar, as if he’d been some expecting it.” (O’Farrel,2010,p. 24).

Then she confirms that the idea immediately turns into a physical effect: “The thought has a physical effect on him. One of displacement and because, like seasickness or looking down from a high building.” (O’Farrel,2010,p.24). According to Rachel Yehuda in her article “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (2002), trauma is not only stored in consciousness, but “reprograms” the body's stress systems so that they respond automatically when the structure of danger is repeated emotionally—even without a clear narrative recall of the event. In this sense, the birth of Ted's son calls not so much “the image of” the mother's death as the same biological sense of danger and loss of control.

Parenting does not enter as a separate stage from the past, but rather as a field that reactivates an old, unclosed experience. The child's attachment to his mother, and his crying during her short absence, turns into a stimulus at Ted that awakens a fear that he cannot name, and this is manifested in the interruption of the sentence before the idea of “disappearance” is completed:



't you at all, it was someone else... It was terrible. I got such a right that I woke up.” (O'Farrel ,2010,p.206)

This can be understand in the light of Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992): trauma requires “testimony” and a listener; and if recognition and listening are absent, trauma returns in non-linguistic forms: dream, image, panic, disturbance, reality. The penetration of the past into the present is embodied in the garden scene, where Ted experiences a cognitive split: he is an adult man, and at the same time a child who sees subtle sensory details of a woman leaving: Ted can see himself as a small boy; he is himself as a small boy... the hem of a long red dress and a bare foot, the nails painted purple “It’s out of the question,” she says. And then she leaves. (O'Farrell, 2010, p. 245)

The shock here is not “a memory” but a re-living: sensory details (the red of the dress, the purple nails, the green comb) as if stuck in the psychological system. This is consistent with van der Kolk *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014): trauma not linked to a linguistic/temporal context returns as a living event within the body and consciousness. In another moment, Ted stops on the street and relives a scene that is “normal” but causes severe panic because it does not match “his childhood that he knows”: Outside on the pavement, he stops. He is remembering or seeing or recognizing something.: “Such an ordinary recollection, but why does none of it fit with the childhood he knows as his own? And why does it imbue him with this sense of panic?” (O'Farrell, 2010, p. 293)

Here the effect of the alternative narrative imposed on him becomes clear: what his body remembers does not match the family tale. This can be explained by Nicolas Abraham & Maria Torok in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (1994): the loss denied recognition turns into “Psychic Crypt” and returns as “Phantom”— a strange inner presence with no name or tale, appearing in sensual images and sudden, inexplicable anxiety.

This return culminates in sea / water scenes, which not only perform an event function, but serve as recurring tragic motifs. The water in the novel is not just a place for Lexie's death or Ted's collapse, but a symbolic medium that links the first loss with his subsequent return. That is why the novel hesitates to name what happens at the sea: “ He looks down into the sea... and the thought crosses her mind that he is about to jump in...”

“She sees him back from the water and then he falls. Or stumbles. Or perhaps collapses. She isn’t sure which”. (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 302).

The hesitation between fall / stumble/collapse reflects the nature of the shock itself as a loss of coherence and control. From the perspective of van der Kolk and Mark Wolynn in *It Didn't Start With You* (2016), this collapse can be understood as a physical return of untreated early trauma. But the sea, at the same time, remains a narrative symbol of vibration, instability, and the recovery of danger whenever life seems to be heading toward stability.

When the truth is revealed all at once (the real mother Lexie, drowning, and the presence of the child), knowledge acts not as a healing tool but as a second trauma:

“She’s your mother.’

‘My mother?’

“Your real mother. Lexie Sinclair,’ ... ‘She drowned .A swimming accident. You were there. It was a week or so after your third birthday.” (Maggie O’Farrell, 2010, p. 318).

Anger then appears as a moral rejection of years of concealment:

“You’re sorry? For lying to me my entry life? For passing off someone else as my mother? For pretending this never happened? It’s— it’s inhuman,’ he gets out, in a hoarse whisper.”(O’Farrel,2010,p. 319)

Ted then enters into a clear physical/psychological withdrawal: “He is lying in bed, the duvet draped over his body. He is curled up, facing the wall.” (O’Farrel,2010,p. 328) “The hunched shape in the bed does not move.”(O’Farrel, 2010,p. 328).

This withdrawal can be understood via Rachel Yehuda in “Biological Factors Associated with Susceptibility to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (2001), as well as her joint study with Amy Lehrner: “Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects: Putative Role of Epigenetic Mechanisms (2018), where she shows that early, unrecognized trauma leaves a permanent disturbance in the regulation of the stress response (e.g., cortisol), “Late knowledge” may reactivate the disturbed system instead of healing it, so collapses and withdrawals appear more sharply. Hence, the novel does not say that narrative recognition automatically leads to recovery, but rather distinguishes between revealing the truth as a shock, and reorganizing it within a safe and tolerable framework. This prepares for the next stage of redemption.



١,٤ Redemption

Ted's healing phase begins in the scene where Elina reads his mother's letter, as the past transforms from a source of breakdown into a narrative that can be listened to without losing his control. This moment represents the most important shift in Ted's psychological path, because it is the first time that he faces the truth not as a new trauma, but as a postponed maternal confession that gives him what he was deprived of in childhood: recognition of his existence as a beloved son. Unlike the previous moment of revealing the truth, which led to his collapse and withdrawal from the world, this stage comes through a conscious initiative by Elina, who does not limit herself to revealing the past, but rather seeks to reformulate it within a containable human framework.

The healing phase begins when Elina decides to search for Ted's mother, not out of curiosity, but out of understanding, and stumbles upon an article written by his mother and published in a magazine, dealing with her maternal experience and feelings for her child. This text, which Ted did not know existed, constitutes the first direct letter from mother to son, even if it came late. When Elina begins reading the article to him, Ted responds not with words, but with subtle physical cues, indicating the beginning of engagement after a long period of isolation: "She sees his arm twitch and she watches, breath held. Will he move? Will he speak? The hand reach up and scratches the back of his head. But he says nothing." (O'Farrel, 2010, p. 340).

This physical response, despite Ted's silence, represents the first break in the state of traumatic inertia, as the body begins to react before language, in clear harmony with the idea that healing from trauma begins with the body before it turns into verbal expression. The message gains its utmost importance when Elina reads the part in which the mother talks about her child as the focus of her maternal experience, using his name that Ted did not know: "As I write, my son lies sleeping across the room. He has been alive two hundred and fifteen days. He and I live together in one room. He has three teeth and two names: Theodore, which is what health visitors call him, and Theo, which is what I call him" (O'Farrel, 2010, p. 341). This moment can be understood as a form of performative testimony rather than simply the transmission of information from the past, as Claudia Welz illustrates in her book *Trauma, Memory, Testimony* (2016) in her reading of the testimony theory of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. Welz



believes that testimony does not represent a neutral retrieval of the traumatic event, but rather a performative act that psychologically reactivates the experience as it is heard or narrated, such that articulation or reception becomes part of the experience taking place anew on both the level of consciousness and body.

This passage not only provides new information, but also brings back to Ted what was psychologically taken from him: the image of the mother who sees him, names him, and gives him a clear emotional identity. The name here is not an accidental detail, but rather evidence of an intimate relationship that Ted did not know existed, which changes his position from an abandoned child to a child who was present in his mother's consciousness and feelings. The positive impact of this message is clearly evident when Ted's body begins to move, and then physical interaction turns into verbal communication for the first time in a long time: "His body strains between the sheets. He twines his head from one side to the other. His eyes, she sees, are open." (O'Farrel, 2010, p. 340) Then comes the watershed moment, as Ted himself asks to continue reading: "Then she feels a pressure on her hand and she speaks his first words for a week. 'Keep going, El,' he says, 'keep going.'" (O'Farrel, 2010, p. 340)

This request represents an explicit announcement of the beginning of healing, as Ted chooses, for the first time, to confront the past within a safe and content context, not as a silent trauma, but as a maternal narrative that gives him recognition and belonging. The message does not bring the mother back physically, but it restores her emotional presence, breaking Ted's isolation by inserting him into a symbolic relationship based on recognition and love.

Therefore, healing here is not about forgetting or erasing the trauma, but about reorganizing it within a human narrative that allows Ted to regain his voice and ability to communicate. Reading the letter doesn't end the pain, but it opens a new path to deal with it, as the past transforms from a silent burden into an listenable experience, making this moment the true starting point for Ted's recovery, not his end.

Ted's healing process can be understood in light of Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), where he asserts that trauma is not stored in narrative memory alone, but is integrated within the body and nervous system, and that healing does not begin with speech or mental knowledge, but rather with the body's sense of security first. Van der Kolk



believes that regaining physical control and a sense of security are the basic conditions for starting any true recovery path.

In Ted's case, his prior knowledge of the truth led to his collapse rather than recovery, because his body was not yet prepared to endure reliving the past. However, the transformation occurs when Elina decides to read the mother's message to him, in a calm and safe context, without imposing a direct confrontation or a demand to speak. According to van der Kolk, such a context allows the nervous system to emerge from a state of maximum alert, and opens the way for a different physical response.

Van der Kolk asserts that the body often responds before language, and that the first signs of healing appear in simple physical changes, such as movement, breathing, and sensory interaction, before turning into verbal expression. This is clearly evident in Ted's response while reading the letter, as his body begins to move after a long period of immobility, indicating that the body is no longer in a state of shock paralysis.

The mother's message gains special therapeutic because because it does not recall the moment of loss itself, but rather presents Ted with a different image of the past, one that recognizes his existence as a beloved and named child. According to van der Kolk, restoring such positive images associated with security and belonging helps reorganize traumatic memory, because it provides the body with an alternative experience that is not associated with danger.

Van der Kolk asserts that healing does not mean erasing trauma, but rather integrating it into a broader experience that allows the individual to regain a sense of self and control. When Ted asks Elina to continue reading, this request represents a moment of recovery of agency, as he moves from a state of passive withdrawal to conscious engagement.

It is important here to emphasize the complexity of this stage: the novel does not present healing as immediate or final, nor does it suggest that mere knowledge alone is sufficient. Previous knowledge of the truth led him to collapse, but reading here works differently because it takes place within a safe and non-coercive relationship. Thus, the novel distinguishes between bare revelation, which restores trauma, and contained recognition, which opens up the possibility of healing. Therefore, Ted's redemption is not a closed conclusion, but rather the beginning of a gradual path in which he regains his voice and sense of self, without the effect of loss being completely eliminated.

Conclusion

This research shows that *The Hand That First Held Mine* presents trauma not as an individual, finished event, but as an extended temporal and relational structure through which trauma is transformed into a transgenerational effect that is passed from mother to son. The analysis has shown, in light of Cathy Caruth, that trauma in the novel is not reduced to the moment of loss itself, but rather appears as a delayed effect that returns through interruption, fragmentation, and delayed understanding. Drawing on Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, unacknowledged trauma does not disappear, but is buried within the psyche as Psychic Crypt, and later returns as anxiety, turmoil, and a constant fear of loss. Through narrative analysis, it becomes clear that the novel represents not only the transmission of trauma through the subject, but also through the form, as silence, symbolic erasure, rewriting the family narrative, and the absence of maternal origin play a decisive role in transforming the loss into a narrative vacuum that continues to shape Ted's consciousness and identity.

In doing so, the novel shows that transgenerational trauma is not transmitted through direct memory, but through the tension between what the body has experienced and what the family narrative has been allowed to say. It also reveals, based on Marianne Hirsch, that the family present can reactivate the past, not only through conscious retrieval, but through everyday relationships that recall the old trace anew. The study also showed that fatherhood in the novel functions not only as a new life stage, but as a narrative turning point that reopens childhood trauma and reveals its deferred structure. In this context, the ideas of Bessel van der Kolk and Rachel Yehuda supported reading the return of trauma as a delayed physical and psychological response, rather than simply a mental recollection of the event.

The analysis, through Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, also shows that traumatic recognition of truth alone does not lead to healing, but may reactivate collapse, whereas the possibility of recovery begins when the experience turns into a listenable testimony within a secure, nurturing relationship, as in the scene of reading a mother's letter. Hence, the contribution of this study to literary trauma scholarship is that it offers a reading that highlights the intersection between trauma theory and narrative form, and demonstrates that the representation of trauma in the novel is not achieved through the event alone, but rather through the



narrative structure, disrupted time, erasure of origin, and reshaping of identity. It also contributes to expanding the study of Maggie O'Farrell's works by focusing on transgenerational trauma as a central axis in understanding the novel. Not just a secondary dimension within the themes of motherhood or memory.

Thus, the study confirms that the unrecognized shock does not go away, but rather waits for the moment of its return, and that breaking the cycle of repetition is not achieved by forgetting, but by reintegrating the past within a human narrative that recognizes the origin and gives it meaning.

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