

Hamnet and Narrative Hygiene: Retelling a Life

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Abstract:

*This paper examines the trauma left behind by the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet as explored in the recently published book *Hamnet* by Maggie O' Farrell. Because of the timing of its publication, March 2020, readers can relate to the book, and empathise with the characters. Exploring a similar psychic geography that we currently inhabit, the world therein set against the Black Death seems contemporaneous. What the author manages to deliver is a fine fusion of the private and the public. Trauma creates a rupture in the continuity of life. The novel tries to posit that by writing the play *Hamlet*, the playwright tries to make sense of the death of his son, and by the same act he transfers private memory to the archives of public memory. This paper explores how externalizing the traumatic event in the form of narrative, by retelling a life in a new order, and rearranging the plot, one can gain control and a certain degree of authority over the events that initially led to the trauma. Seen from another perspective, even the book *Hamnet* is an attempt at knowledge production around the son of Shakespeare by thrusting him from forgetfulness into cultural memory, and from obscurity into language by the very act of writing about him. The structure of the novel is like two concentric circles centred on death and disease. While at the intradiegetic level, the characters try to make sense of the loss of their child, at the extradiegetic one, we, the readers, get a glimpse of a plague-ridden world, not very different from our own, infested with a pandemic. At both levels, stories help us make sense of the existential mess we are in.*

Keywords: *Trauma, Narrative, Retelling, Private/Public Memory, Pandemic*

In the recently published book by Maggie O' Farrell, *Hamnet*, although the event that directly concerns us is a single traumatic event at a deeply personal level, when we zoom out we see it as one of a long chain of interconnected events in a narrative of misfortune that connects human lives across time and space. Exploring a similar psychic geography that we currently inhabit, the world therein set against the Black Death seems contemporaneous. What the author manages to deliver is a fine fusion of the private and the public.

My discussion of this particular text explores the psychosocial dimension of trauma, and relies on the critical tools offered by psychoanalysis but at a rudimentary level. Instead of relying heavily on a critical methodology, this paper draws on my very own and intimate ways of reading, responding and relating to the text, and of being touched and affected by it. Before going to the text, here is a little bit about the context in which the book was picked and read. Our entire species is trying to come to grips with a pandemic, in a society where everything from 'normal' relationships, to eating and outing habits, to cremation and burial practices has changed. The novel coronavirus outbreak and its global spread is the present generation's first real brush with history. If history were a train, we have our tickets confirmed for the first time, and millions of our species are aboard the same train. This

pandemic is a trauma on various levels – psychic, socio-political, economic- the effects are aftereffects of which can be fully comprehended only with the hindsight that comes with the lapse of time. But what is certain is that it has created a dent in the continuity of life, a narrative with a proper beginning, middle, and end. For once, Heraclitus’s proverbial river has been left stagnant, and we, under total lockdown, step into the same waters again and again.

After the initial numbness and the shock had subsided, many of us sought ways of escape, not unlike Boccaccio’s storytellers in the *Decameron* who assemble in the countryside away from the city of Florence and make merry by sharing stories to temporarily forget the pestilence looming large over everything. Martin Marafioti calls it “narrative prophylaxis” – protecting oneself with stories. He further posits that a number of medical texts both influenced and were later influenced by the literary escapades in the *Decameron* in advocating literary pursuits as a way of diverting the mind and keeping spirits high (Marafioti 69). This group of seven ladies and three gentlemen were the equivalents of the present day people of privilege who can afford to distract themselves with art in its various manifestations, and with stories. Along with social distancing, we are also observing what can be termed narrative distancing – distancing ourselves from stories of death and infections. *Hamnet* too was picked up as a way of escape. The book centres round the death of Hamnet, Shakespeare’s son, and is a fictional account of the circumstances leading to his death and to the writing of *Hamlet* named after the son. Although historical evidence or facts regarding his life or the cause of his death is scant, Maggie O’ Farrell imaginatively ascribes the cause to the Bubonic plague, and spins the narrative likewise. The novel, being set in the last decade of the 16th century, seemed to ensure a safe distance from our present ordeal, and for objectivity. But reading it brought the realization that stories such as this bring human beings across time into a shared space of narrative solidarity the very basis of which is human suffering.

Trauma creates a rupture in the continuity of life. It comes unannounced, when the victim least expects it, and is least prepared to integrate it in the narrative of life. It is so swift that it passes before the consciousness can capture its movements. Agnes – Hamnet’s mother and the playwright’s wife – least expects to find her twins Judith and Hamnet infected with the plague, and more so to lose Hamnet to death.

The initial, instinctive reaction to a tragedy – personal or collective – is to move into a state of denial. That is naturally the way Agnes reacts when she first spots the buboes pushing themselves out of her daughter’s skin. The buboes were dreaded, and found a place for themselves in the literature of fear that people knew about but never spoke of. Narrative hygiene was as important as physical hygiene. The very word “buboes” was never allowed to be formed, an airy substance that, nonetheless, chased Agnes’s children down. All fearful things appear to us like fiction. We instinctively believe that nothing bad can ever happen to us. When there was news of the coronavirus outbreak in China, China seemed too far. But then this thing crossed borders on the wings of a bird, literally on the wings of international airplanes. It reached our country, then state, then district, then our neighbourhoods. But until it touched one in the family, we still remained in denial. Agnes too was in a state of denial. Although there were cases of infections now and then, some of which she had herself cured or treated in the past, she could not believe her eyes when she first saw those buboes on her daughter’s body. The most dreaded moment had come. “The moment she has feared most...The pestilence had reached her house. It had marked her child’s neck” (97).

Agnes had a way with herbs. The entire vicinity came to her for treatment, no matter what ailment one suffered from, and she cured them with her homemade potions made from roots and plants. It was “a magic, a gift” that never failed but once, when she needed it to work the most. She could not save her own child from the clutches of death. The birth scene of the twins shows that Agnes gave birth to a healthy, beautiful boy and a weak, crying girl with flailing breath who showed no zeal for life even at birth. The mother had not expected the girl to survive, but eventually she did. The twins were one life split into two, like “two halves of a walnut” (151). It had always been Judith who was supposed to die, ever since birth. But the twins swapped positions without anyone’s notice. Agnes was prepared to lose Judith because she had been treating her insanely with all the medicinal herbs she could procure from her physic garden, but saw them failing. None of her potions helped to resuscitate the child. Judith was turning into a spectre right before her eyes, but then this cruel turn of fate took away her healthy child. Hamnet accepted death on her behalf. While Agnes “concentrated on the wrong child” (186), and was distracted, death took away her other child.

Trauma stills the life of the victim, freezes it in time, suspends it in a particular mental space, while all around life goes on as usual. This very quality of grief that it is intimate, private, unshared and unsharable, makes it so difficult to bear. In her grief, the mother found herself alone. All other kids of her son’s age were alive and kicking and playing, while her Hamnet was gone. A crucial difference between personal and collective trauma is that in the former the victim finds herself lonely, and in most cases without empathy. And she often asks a fundamental question – “Why me?” In cases of collective crises like the Holocaust or the Wars, or the Partition of India which is closer to our collective imagination, we see that the pain is shared on a large scale, and so is empathy. Our present situation similarly demands empathy on our part more than ever, as readers, more so as humans. The pandemic has brought our social lives to a standstill. The quotidian life has receded to the background, and we are trying our best to adapt to the situation and bring into effect the new normal. While

human beings struggle and human social connectivity has been disrupted, we see that the societies of nature continue as before. None of the natural processes has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Spring brought colours. The scents of summer are intact. Life goes on without us. In a similar manner, while Hamnet’s family is still unable to recuperate with the loss, Judith’s cats give birth to different batches of kittens. As for her mother’s gardens, they continue to flower. “Gardens don’t stand still. They are always in flux”(241).

The same tragedy touches different lives differently and elicits different responses from each. Mary, who has herself lost her daughter to the plague, believes that “grief is all very well in moderation” (224). Judith keeps looking for her other half. “What is the word, Judith asks her mother, for someone who was a twin but is no longer a twin?”(215). She tries to seek answers in the realm of language, as if she could grasp the meaning of her loss if she found a word that could describe it. Susanna sews and sews the entire time. “If she just keeps on making stitches, of equal size, over and over, perhaps all this will pass”(225). As for Agnes, she can make no sense at all of the loss. All the daily chores now seem pointless, cooking and eating too seem pointless. The grief is all consuming and takes up all her time. “She discovers that it is possible to cry all day and night”(212).

The loss has to be comprehended in order to be mourned. Forgetting of loss is crucial to mourning. Mourning is a sign that gives off the first instinct of survival. According to Judith Herman, “Folk

wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of the individual victim” (Herman 1). There are ghosts in *Hamnet* too, both literal and metaphorical. The child Hamnet, just moments before dying, is called a “ghost” by Susanna. After his death, rumour has it that a little figure runs along Henley Street at night, presumably the ghost of Hamnet. The in-text play “Hamlet” is spectral on more than one level. Through it Shakespeare imaginatively brings back his own dead son, and it becomes the final work of mourning. The “unfinished business” of Hamlet’s ghost is accomplished, but by the father Hamlet who steps in his son’s place. Although pain cannot be accurately translated into words, and a portion of it is eternally lost in translation, only words can come closest to the original thing. It is only through words that one eventually gains control over the chaotic mass of raw materials left behind by a personal tragedy. Deborah Horvitz asks:

Can narrative, itself, by compelling victim-survivors to remember and to repeat stories suffused with terror, panic, and pain, serve a palliative role in the healing process? Certainly, psychoanalysis believes that crucial to recovering from an experience of trauma is the capacity and willingness to incorporate that traumatic event inside one’s self as an indispensable piece of personal history and identity. (Horvitz 6)

The playwright makes the “ghost” speak up, thus bringing the unspeakable into existence with the stroke of his pen. With the stroke of his pen, he also rewrites the order of things, and retells his son’s life. Agnes’s first reaction on reading the name of her son on a London playbill is one of anger and disbelief. “He is himself, not a play, not a piece of paper, not something to be spoken of or performed or displayed” (251). Agnes’s behavior is the most common reflex of people in trauma. They want to hold on to their pain and never talk about it because it is beyond the grasp of language, and because no one will understand. But when she first sees Hamlet on stage, the actor enacting her son, he seems strange but familiar. “Yet this is him, grown into a near-man, as he would be now, had he lived, on the stage, walking with her son’s gait, talking in her son’s voice, speaking words written for him by her son’s father” (265). The retelling makes the traumatic event stitch together the shattered plot of life.

Making a strong distinction between mourning and melancholy, Freud argues in “Mourning and Melancholia” that while successful mourning facilitates forgetting, melancholy archives grief, stacks it away in mental or material forms, only to go back to it again and again. The victim of trauma is of the latter kind. Agnes cuts a lock of her son’s hair and Judith makes a silk pouch in which to keep it, and they both search for Hamnet in this archived material object. The playwright, however, externalizes the traumatic event, archiving it in the shape of a play, coming into a dialogue with an audience, and transfers it from the private to the public domain, there to stay forever.

The archive, as traditionally conceived, is a location of knowledge, a place where history itself is housed, where the past is accommodated. The archive is intimately conjoined with cultural memory, with its preservation, perhaps even with its supplementation (Boulter 3)

Seen from another perspective, even the book *Hamnet* is an attempt at knowledge production around the son of Shakespeare by thrusting him from forgetfulness into cultural memory, and from obscurity into language by the very act of writing about him.

The writer structures the novel in two concentric circles centred on death and disease. While at the intradiegetic level, the characters try to make sense of the loss of their child, at the extradiegetic one,

we, the readers, get a glimpse of a plague-ridden world, not very different from our own, infested with a pandemic. At some crucial junctures, the two levels connect. Agnes's moment of catharsis as a spectator watching her son's life retold and re-enacted on stage is contagious and reaches the reader. The narrative does not take away the loss, but teaches one to live with whatever remains. The strained relationship between the couple is somehow restored as the play tries to put back together a bond that was coming apart. The playwright by holding out the powers of his imagination swaps places with his son in meeting death, thereby gaining authority over their lives. What gives us solace as readers is the possibility of becoming the authors of our own lives. Life gains meaning when it is told.

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