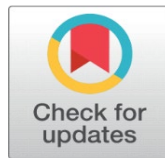
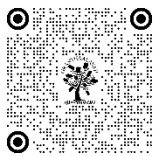


TRAUMATOGENIC FEELINGS: A STUDY OF LITERARY AND CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS IN SELECT WORKS

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ABSTRACT

The creative expressions of traumas can be literary works, blogs, films or documentaries. Such works do serve in expurgating the traumatogenic feelings in given situations almost in a cathartic manner. This paper aims to analyze the representations of trauma in select works-novels adapted into films. It tries to bring out the significance of educating people about trauma with the help of literary and cinematic depictions. Critics like Anne Whitehead and Michael Rothberg have studied various representations of trauma. However, this paper considers the role of media in informing people of probable traumatic situations. A close reading of literary and cinematic representations of trauma in *The Secret Life of Bees*, and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is attempted here to understand the impact of traumatogenic feelings in individuals caught in convulsive situations. *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008) by Gina Prince-Bythewood is an adaptation of Sue Monk Kidd's novel of the same title. It presents the story of Lily Owens, who has lost her mother at the tender age of four. She stays with her abusive father T Ray and their servant Rosaleen. Her life is engulfed with many unfavourable conditions, which she battles along with Rosaleen. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) is the filmic adaptation of Lionel Shriver's novel of the same name. It narrates the story of Kevin who murders his father and sister. The selected representations will show how children are vulnerable to traumas, as a shaping factor in their conduct and behaviour- thus giving the analysis a psychoanalytic touch-which bears on the cultural consequences of traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Traumatogenic Feelings, Literary and Cinematic Adaptations, Representations, Psychoanalytic Aspects, Cultural Consequences

1. INTRODUCTION

Gina Prince-Bythewood (b. 1969) is an American director who projects the experiences of women of colour in her films. *Love and Basketball* (2000), *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008), *Beyond the Lights* (2014), *The Old Guard* (2020) and *The Woman King* (2022) are the significant films by Prince-Bythewood ("Gina Prince-Bythewood," 2024). Of these, she has written the script for *Love and Basketball* (2000), *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008) and *Beyond the Lights* (2014). On the other hand, Lynne Ramsay (b. 1969) is a Scottish film writer who creates movies on death,

childhood and rebirth ("Lynne Ramsay," 2024). Her films include *Ratcatcher* (1999), *Morvern Callar* (2002), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), and *You Were Never Really Here* (2017).

Prince Brythewood's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008) and Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) are film adaptations from novels of the same name that depict some traumatogenic situations encountered by children. The current paper aims to look at the depictions of traumatogenic situations in films and novels. It scrutinizes whether the traumatogenic incidents are better represented in films than in novels. For this, the current paper takes traumatogenic situations in both films and their corresponding depictions in the novels based on their relevance and feasibility. The study aims at evaluating the judiciousness of using film as a means to depict traumatogenic situations.

Both the films selected for the analysis present detrimental or negative parent-child relationships, a probable traumatogenic situation in families. In *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008), a girl who lost her mother in her tender childhood is living with her abusive father. She cannot tolerate the humiliations and arrogance of her father and ultimately leaves her father with Rosaleen, a black servant. She tries to figure out her mother's past as her mother remains a distressing memory in her mind. The work also depicts the traumatic situations of the Afro-Americans. Alternatively, in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), Eva is traumatized by the childrearing of her firstborn, Kevin. Kevin behaves like an abnormal child in his childhood and culminates into a mass killer in his teenage.

Many studies have already been carried out on the representations of trauma in the visual media. Photography, films and television have also been acknowledged for their role in providing visual evidence for international events (Ashuri, 2010, 175). The current paper explores whether the representations in films are accurate to real or an adequate representation of reality. It analyses how suitable films are as a medium to represent the traumatogenic feelings of individuals. It will also study the differences in visual and literary representations of trauma.

In the light of our analysis, it is construed that traumatogenic feelings cannot be fully alleviated in their representations, and rather, they can create a horrific atmosphere. That is, though art is believed to expurgate emotions, it sometimes leaves us perplexed. However, the media can help in educating people about various traumas. The films and literary works selected for analysis show the traumatogenic situations encountered by children and their responses to them.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The effectiveness of using films as a medium for the representations of trauma has been analyzed far before, and it has been concluded that "Film is capable of visualizing 'traumata' because it can most effectively depict irregularities and anachronisms" (Elm et al., 2014, p. 9). It has also been pointed out that personal tragedies or traumas are transferred into collective traumas in cinema by means of 'i-witnesses', and many times, the audience itself is transferred into the position of the witness in cinema (Ashuri, 2010, p. 172). According to Tamar Ashuri, films help reconcile traumatic events. The role of witnesses in representing trauma and accepting traumatic situations cannot be undermined.

Studies have already been carried out on the representations of the Holocaust in media. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, in their *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature*, analyze the Fortunoff Video Archives and the film Shoah, where the memories and trauma of the Holocaust are shared. Traumas well-represented in the

media include the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, and 9/11 (Meek, 2010, p. 28). The victims' and the perpetrators' representations in films have been studied by theorists like Lesley Marx (2006, 22). One of the earliest critics of trauma includes Dominic LaCapra, who studied how history and trauma are represented in literature.

The filmic representations of traumas and their analyses by film critics have resulted in a reexamination of the initial formulations of trauma theory by Cathy Caruth, which concluded that trauma is an unrepresentable event (Meek, 2010, p. 29). There have been studies on the necessity of making cinematic representations true, aesthetic and ethical ones by critics like Lesley Marx. However, the representations cannot be an exact copy of the original event. It could also be drawn from imaginative situations. There are many films on trauma and PTSD, but the films selected for the current analysis are actually film adaptations of literary works.

Films are indeed capable of representing traumas within a short period, unlike literary works, but the aesthetic experiences we get from them are hugely varied. Literary works take enormous spaces for their representations. However, films could do it within a short period with their visual representations. Additionally, films do not traumatize individuals or communities on their own, but emotionally charged narratives may stimulate traumatogenic feelings in individuals or groups.

Filmic representations of novels are readily available pictorial representations that help in understanding the concepts, plot, or theme within a short period. The filmic representations in this paper are pictorial representations of traumatogenic situations in ordinary lives. Lily and Eva are the central characters in the films *The Secret Life of Bees* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, respectively. Lily is a small girl who tries to unveil the secrets related to the death of her mother. Eva, on the other hand, is a hysteric mother who ceases to love her first-born son, Kevin, who believes that he is not receiving the care he ought to get.

3. THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES

The novel *The Secret Life of Bees* (2001) by Sue Monk Kidd, set in the background of the civil rights movements in South Carolina in 1964, narrates the story of Lily, who has been mistreated by her father, Terence Ray. Lily is longing for the presence of her demised mother. The absence of a mother is the central traumatogenic event in Lily's life. The novel presents Lily's attachment to her mother through descriptions of her imagination. For instance,

That night I lay in bed and thought about dying and going to be with my mother in paradise. I would meet her saying, 'Mother, forgive. Please forgive,' and she would kiss my skin till it grew chapped and tell me I was not to blame. She would tell me this for the first ten thousand years (Kidd, 2001, 3).

On the other hand, in the film *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008), Lily's ruminations on her mother are presented to depict her love for her mother in the film. The movie begins with a fight scene between a couple.

T. Ray: Deborah? Where you been?
 Deborah: I'm sorry. I'm sorry T.
 T. Ray: Are you cheating on me?
 Deborah: No, no! I'm not cheating on you.
 Stop it! What are you doing?
 T! Stop it.

T. Ray: You ain't leaving me! Who is it?

Deborah: Nobody! It's you!

I hate you. T Ray just let me go. (Prince Brythewood, 2008,0:37-1:33).

The husband is suspicious of his wife. He suspects his wife to be having some illicit relationship. By the end of the scene, the audience hear the sound of a gunshot. The wife is dead. Lily, the daughter of the couple, feels that she is responsible for her mother's death. Lily does not know anything about her mother, for her mother died when she was four.

Deborah had abandoned Lily for a while before her death. Mr Ray misleads Lily of this: "The truth is your sorry mother ran off and left you. The day she died, she'd come back to get her things, that's all..., but she is the one who left you" (Kidd, 2001, pp. 49-50). He says that Deborah came only to take her things and not for her. Lily feels abandoned by both her parents after hearing T. Ray's remarks. She contemplates, "Children did not have two parents who refused to love them. One, maybe, but for pity's sake, not two" (51).

Bees in the Room are a recurring image in both the film and the novel (Kidd 5, 34, 50-51; Prince Blythewood, 2:28, 5:53). Bees symbolically represent Lily's quest for her mother. In the story, Lily finds it very difficult to convince others that she frequently notices bees in her bedroom. The bees were the way to know her mother. Her mother was brought up by the Boatwright family, which does the honey business. Lily comes to know of her mother only with her acquaintance with the Boatwright family and their business with bees.

Lily has concealed one of her mother's boxes on the ground without Ray's knowledge. She preserves this as one of the most precious gifts. When Lily lies in an open ground with her mother's photo on her belly, T. Ray suspects her of having an affair. He lets her stand on her knees, and this leaves marks on her leg (10:04). On her rapport with the Boatwright family, she gets more belongings and possessions of her mother.

Lily yearns to be by her mother while she was with the Boatwright family:

The worst thing was lying there wanting my mother. That's how it had always been; my longing for her nearly always came late at night when my guard was down. I tossed on the sheets, wishing I could crawl into bed with her and smell her skin. I wondered: Had she worn thin nylon gowns to bed? Did she bobby-pin her hair? I could just see her, propped in bed. My mouth twisted as I pictured myself climbing in beside her and putting my head against her breast. I would put it right over her beating heart and listen. *Mama*, I would say. And she would look down at me and say, *Baby, I'm right here*. (Kidd, 121-122)

Lily has to witness the assault by some White men on Rosaleen, a coloured servant. She leaves her father as he rescinded from helping Rosaleen. She elopes with Rosaleen and ends up with August Boatwright. She stayed in the honey house and ultimately understood the underlying problems between her parents. The plot would have been entirely different if Lily ends up in some other place other than with the Boatwright family. She would never have been capable of understanding anything of her mother's past, if she could not find them. It is August who tells Lily how her mother left her husband and came to her. Lily seemed to be significantly affected by understanding that her mother had indeed abandoned her for a while. In the film, Lily is pictured destroying some bottles of honey, showing her disappointment and frustration (1:25:16).

When August handed Lily some belongings of her mother, Lily got very emotional on seeing a framed photo of herself along with her mother (1: 29: 43).

Her mother's pin was also among the belongings. When T. Ray finds Lily after long searches, she is wearing the pin he gave Deborah for her birthday. He understood the whole story about Deborah's temporal absence from Lily and that all his suspicions about her had been cleared. The film ends positively with positive affirmations. On the other hand, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* does not give any positive ending.

4. WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

The novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) by Lionel Shriver is an epistolary novel which begins with a quote from Erma Bombeck, which reiterates the importance of loving a child in his/her childhood. Her novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) has been adapted into a BBC drama as well. In the novel, the traumatogenic incidents in Eva's life are communicated to the readers in the form of letters by her to her husband, Franklin. Whereas in the film, the narrative took the form of memories instead of letters. The filmic representations give us an intense picturization of the traumatic situations in Kevin's family. Kevin has been immensely affected by his lack of affection and care from his parents, so he stopped responding to his mother's instructions. Both the movie and the book suggest personality disorders in Kevin's family. The visible personality disorders in Kevin's family might be the result of some underlying traumatogenic situations in the family.

Persons affected by traumas might have personality disorders. International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10 (ICD 10) identifies personality changes after catastrophic experiences (Scott & Stradling, 2001, p. 2). Eva also has some personality issues. She could not forgive whatever Kevin does as a child's craziness. She behaves very irritably. She could not tolerate any acts of disobedience from her son. On one instance, when Kevin ravages Eva's organized room with paint, she reacts by destroying the painting instrument itself (Ramsay 2011, 41: 04- 41:24). Had Eva been a compromising mother who does not get easily irritated Kevin would not have grown out to be such a rogue. Eva could not control her feelings, and she once punished him for pooping which left a mark on his hand. In the film, on visiting Kevin in jail, she recalls how Kevin got a mark on his hand:

Eva: Do you remember how you got that?

Kevin: It's the most honest thing you ever did?

Do you know how they potty train cats?

They stick their noses in their own shit (42:15- 42:45).

Kevin cannot change his habit of pooping in Pampers even after he grows up, and this further irritates Eva (43:45-44:16). Out of anger, Eva once threw Kevin, and this broke his hands. Eva could have reacted more politely to Kevin's unacceptable behaviours. Eva considers Kevin very mischievous, and her behaviour towards him is based on this presumption. He, on the other hand, makes things look messy (50:27- 50:36). This further irritates Eva. Whether Kevin is inherently malign or if his actions are the reaction to Eva's attitudes toward him is a question to be pondered. However, Kevin's breaking of the crayon in the film might suggest his destructive behaviour (52:30).

Eva, as a mother, was very overpressurizing. One day, when Kevin was studying with Eva, he excelled by saying numbers up to fifty in a correct manner. Rather than being satisfied with what Kevin did, Eva asked Kevin to make massive calculations. She might be doing this, for she unknowingly wishes to mark Kevin as a failure. The deliberate sabotaging irritates Kevin, and he throws the paper into a crumple.

Nevertheless, Kevin is very calm when Eva treats him patiently for his mistakes. The calm demeanour suggests that if Eva had been more careful, Kevin would not have grown arrogant. Kevin behaves lovingly to Eva when she reads him a book (56: 54). Kevin's interactions with his mother are mostly problematic in the film and the novel. On the other hand, Kevin's interactions with his dad are satisfactory. Dad encourages Kevin to find his passions. He buys Kevin good-quality bows and arrows. He often finds time to play with Kevin, and he helps Kevin to practice bow and arrow.

Films and other technological mediums help people express individual and collective traumas. The sequence of the film is not in chronological order, and this reiterates the trauma in Eva's family. The film is portrayed through Eva's memories. Eva's memories illustrate the underlying trauma in her mind. She has been traumatized after her first delivery, for she has to leave her job and confine herself to child-rearing. All her professional aspirations were at stake after this. Eva is often confronted by the memories of her past. While walking through the streets, she remembers Franklin's words when she told him that she was to leave for work after pregnancy.

Franklin: Christ! To Ecuador? For 2 months? Why can't they send someone else?

Eva: I really wanna work this deal.

Franklin: Then he makes up his own little language, and that is annoying. First he cries too much, then he's quiet. He has trouble communicating. A lot of kids do.

And you see this as some kind of personal vendetta? It's not good for him (53: 50- 54:24).

In the novel, she rethinks her decision to have a child. She decided to have a child only because society pushed her to prove her fertility. She feels that after marriage, it is very difficult to live without children. She wishes to live a peaceful life with her husband without having to take responsibility for her children. The movie could not present these inner emotions in Eva's mind. In the book, Eva's perceptions of marriage are described thus:

What possessed us? We were so happy! Why, then, did we take the stake of all we had and place it all on this outrageous gamble of having a child? Of course you consider the very putting of that question profane. Although the infertile are entitled to sour grapes, it's against the rules, isn't it, to actually have a baby and spend any time at all on that banished parallel life in which you didn't. (Shriver, 2006, 14)

When Eva got pregnant the second time, she kept it a secret without even communicating this with Franklin. Celia is born. Kevin is angry with Celia because he believes that he will not get the care and attention he deserves from his parents. He often mistreats his sister, Celia. Even the games he plays with his sister are mischievous—for instance, the Christmas kidnapping game. In one scene, we see the girl wrapped in decoration materials after their play (Ramsay, 1:03:00- 1:03:16). He uses the vacuum cleaner into the girl's hair.

Colour helps convey the intensity of Eva's traumatic situation. Eva's hands are full of red paint, and she washes them like Lady Macbeth (1:20:43). This scene symbolically suggests that Eva might be feeling guilty for Celia's eyeglasses. The red colour of the paint might denote blood. Bloody hands signify crimes committed by an individual. The film suggests that Eva either feels responsible for the things that happen in her family or is really liable for the things that happen. In another scene, Eva's face is lit with red colour. The red colour on Eva's face signifies the tension and stress Eva is going through (1:37:04).

In many scenes in the film, Eva finds it challenging to sleep. Lack of sleep or difficulty in sleeping arises as a result of underlying trauma (Whitehead, 2004, p. 17).

Eva's house is also destroyed with red paint (1:28:11- 1:28:36). People attack her house because her son has killed many fellow students in Gladstone High School. The impact of Kevin's act is described in the novel thus:

Home is precisely what Kevin has taken from me. My neighbors now regard me with the same suspicion they reserve for illegal immigrants. They grope for words and speak to me with exaggerated deliberation, as if to a woman for whom English is a second language. And since I have been exiled to this rarefied class, the mother of one of those "Columbine boys," I, too, grope for words, not sure how to translate my off-world thoughts into the language of two-for-the-price-of-one sales and parking tickets. Kevin has turned me into a foreigner again, in my own country. (Shriver, 2003, 52)

Kevin becomes jealous of seeing his dad and Celia playing (1:31:36). He kills them and leaves for his school as he cannot subjugate his anger. He goes to the school very determined to kill. In the door Kevin opens, there are two statements: "Pride: A feeling which makes you want to do your best all the time in everything you do", and "Focus- Concentration of the mind such that nothing distracts you from your task (1:33:27)." The Quotes in the door indicate what is going to happen.

Kevin locks the school door with the bike latches he bought online. Some guards cut the latches from outside the school, and Kevin comes out of the school and surrenders. Kevin might not have locked the outer latches, for he was inside the building. This scene is problematic in its creation. Eva is very shocked to understand that Kevin was responsible for the massacre inside the school building.

Eva visits Kevin in jail. The conversations between the mother and the son indicate an underlying communication gap between them.

Eva: You don't look happy.

Kevin: Have I Ever? I was 18, aren't I?

Eva: What is it?

Going to the big school making you nervous

Kevin: Do you know anything about those places? (Ramsay, 2011, 1:43:24)

In the analysis of the novel by Vivienne Muller, she acknowledges that Eva failed to create a strong attachment with her son (Muller, 2008, p. 11). Whenever Eva tries to befriend Kevin, he always turns down her attempts. The film shows many unsuccessful attempts by Eva to make an emotional connection with Kevin. It presents a penetrating picture of a mother who tries to be a good mother for her son, irrespective of her official struggles. Once, when Eva takes him to dinner and a miniature golf game, Kevin retorts with negative comments.

Sue Thornham analyses the film *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) in the context of American 'new momism'. New momism celebrates intensive mothering, where a woman submits to the child instead of her husband (Thornham, 2015, p. 44). According to her, Eva is a new Mom who is submissive to her child. However, Eva is not entirely submissive to her son. Instead, she tries to assert her parental position with him. In the film, Eva's life as a strong working woman changes once on getting pregnant. Her desire and right to live as she wishes are negated when she has to leave her work to embrace motherhood. Her agencies get removed, and she has to live like any other woman (Thornham, 2015, p. 50).

The film *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) can be compared to *Midsommar* (2019) by Ari Aster, which is set against the murder of parents by a girl named Terri. It is also similar to *Babadook* (2014) by Jennifer Kent, who looks at the strained relationships between a mother and a son (McManus 2023, n.p.). Shriver herself acknowledges that there are some personal elements in her novel. She says that as a woman, she hates to have children, for she does not want something to get in between her and her writing ("BBC", 4:01- 4:47).

5. OBSERVATIONS

The filmic and the literary representations of trauma give insights in varied manners. Where films use visual images and altered sequences to represent traumas, literary works use figurative language and memories to represent trauma. Moreover, literary works require more space and time in their demonstrations of trauma. Additionally, it is not reconciliation that happens after viewing filmic representations of trauma. It results in an understanding catered by the media. This current article argues that filmic representations of trauma are more appealing in the current scenario than the written accounts of trauma, for they are easily accessible and are within a short period. Filmic representations of trauma cannot always be 'true to real' representations; instead, they can also be 'true to the imaginary', as in the case of the adaptations made of literary works. However, true-to-real or true-to-imaginal representations help in educating people about probable traumatogenic situations. That is, media aids in educating people about traumatogenic situations. Both the films selected for the current analysis have presented true to real-life representations of traumatogenic situations.

Based on the selected films, chronological order is not a necessary element when representing traumatogenic situations. Aligning with the arguments of Ashuri, the paper acknowledges the role witnesses or audience play in the filmic representations of trauma. The interpretations of representations of trauma are affected by the one who narrates and one who views. That is Lily in *The Secret Life of the Bees* and Eva in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. Historical traumas are well represented in media, but these are far-away events for the ordinary spectators. Representations of personal traumas and tragedies provide more appealing pictures or portrayals of traumas. The films under discussion delineate familial personal traumas.

We Need to Talk about Kevin (2011) suggests that traumatogenic situations might result in personality disorders. It is not merely Eva who is traumatized, but Kevin too is going through some trauma. No one in the family understands Kevin's problems. Only Eva suspects his behaviours. However, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008) and Lily suggest that not all individuals will have problems with their personalities, even if they are in a traumatogenic situation. Another observation is that yearning for love is a common characteristic of children in traumatogenic situations. All the literary works selected for the analysis suggest this implication. It can also be inferred that although there are victims and perpetrators for some kinds of trauma, there may not be proper victims or perpetrators in some situations. For instance, in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, we cannot merely categorize either Eva or Kevin as victim or perpetrator.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Only a few literary and filmic texts have been selected for analysis as samples of representations of traumatogenic situations. Further studies can be conducted on the contemporaneity of filmic narratives of trauma.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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