



GENERATIONAL TRAUMA ON MOTHERHOOD IN ASHLEY AUDRAIN'S NOVEL *THE PUSH* (2021)

Filza Aulia¹, Leni Marlina²

English Department
Faculty of Languages and Arts
Universitas Negeri Padang
email: filzaaulia1612@gmail.com

Abstract

Ashley Audrain's novel, *The Push* (2021), offers a chilling yet engaging representation of motherhood that passes trauma across generations. In this work, a qualitative assessment of literary elements will highlight the representation of trauma across iterations for the main character in her role as a mother and her ways to cope with trauma inherited within her family. With feminist theory in literature and trauma studies, a thorough analysis of plot, setting, conflict, and characterization will illustrate how trauma transcends generations of women in the family. *The Push* challenges the perspectives on motherhood by how the main character deals with generational trauma in her family, using the methods mentioned in the results

Keywords: generational trauma, motherhood, feminist literary theory, trauma studies

INTRODUCTION

State the objectives of your work and provide an adequate background, avoiding a detailed Motherhood is famously depicted as a natural and nurturing process. However, the more realistic depiction of this phenomenon can be seen through the lens of current literary works, which steadily begin to dismantle this ideal of the natural experience of motherhood. *The Push* by Ashley Audrain (2021) is a novel that explores the world of trauma through the voice of Blythe Connor, a character whose experiences disrupt the natural way of portraying the life of a mother.

Intergenerational trauma can be defined as psychological trauma that is generated through behavior, memory, or emotions that are transmitted from a certain generation in a family or clan to another. In *The Push*, trauma cannot be experienced in a solitary or individual manner but through a maternal legacy Blythe's experience with her life as a mother can never remain unaffected by her complicated past with her own mother, Cecilia, and her grandmother, Etta.

The paper will concentrate on two research questions. The first relates to how the literary devices of *The Push* convey the trauma of the main character as a

mother, about her family background. The second relates to how the main character deals with trauma inherited from her family's past as a mother. In addressing these two points, the paper will seek to answer how a specific author uses narrative methods in storytelling through an exploration of trauma and an examination of maternal themes that mirror feminist ideology.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. The primary data source was Ashley Audrain's novel *The Push* (2021). The data consisted of narrative passages, dialogues, and descriptions related to motherhood, trauma, and familial relationships.

The data were collected through close reading techniques, focusing on literary elements such as plot, setting, conflict, and characterization. Feminist literary theory and trauma theory were applied as the analytical frameworks to interpret how generational trauma is constructed and transmitted within the narrative. The data were analyzed by categorizing relevant excerpts according to the selected literary elements and interpreting them in relation to the research questions.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

The way in which generational trauma is represented in *The Push* is very much rooted in literary devices, especially plot, setting, conflict, and character. Audrain has a very fragmented narrative style, which represents the psychological fragmentation experienced by trauma. The non-linear narrative can be seen to represent the way in which past trauma continuously disrupts the present. This can be related to trauma theory, which states that memories associated with trauma are difficult to tie up in a linear narrative. They will instead come out in unexpected bursts.

The narrative often contrasts Blythe's experiences as a mother, as well as her fears related to her motherhood, and her memories of her parent, Cecilia, as an emotionally cold mother. The non-linear narrative shows how Blythe's fear of being the "bad" mother has nothing to do with her daughter and, instead, is the result of her inherited trauma.

Setting is also an essential element in the depiction of trauma. The domestic setting, which is associated with the feeling of safety and warmth, is represented as an arena where the characters experience their anxieties and confinements emotionally. The domestic setting of Blythe, for instance, is portrayed as an arena of observation and doubts, which symbolizes her psychologically rooted fear of failure as a mother. The institutional setting, such as the hospital, represents the feeling of solitude, which further enhances Blythe's feeling of not being

understood and heard. Conflict also lays bare the psychological impact of intergenerational trauma. The inner conflict within the character Blythe is more prominent in the novel because she fights the fear, jealousy, and guilt she feels in her relationship with her daughter. This inner conflict further worsens because of the outer conflicts she has with her husband, Fox. Fox ignores her troubles and expects her to behave according to patriarchal ideologies related to motherhood. The feminist approach to literature observes how these ideologies further suppress women's narratives because they experience the pain of motherhood inappropriately or shamefully.

Characterization is arguably the most important literary device in conveying generational trauma. Blythe is made highly unreliable yet profoundly truthful in her narration, which is indicative of the cumulative impact of intergenerational trauma. Both Cecilia and Etta are emotionally neglectful mothers, which sets another pattern of dysfunctional mothering in their family lineage. This literary device emphasizes that trauma is not inherited but rather emotionally passed down in terms of behavior, silence, and repression. *The Push*, therefore, conveys generational trauma as if it is inevitable and maternal identity as intertwined with psychological inheritance through these literary devices. Trauma is not only present in terms of thematic ideas but rather in the structuring of narratives as if maternal identity cannot be dissociated from psychological inheritance.

Blythe's experiences as a mother are characterized by her struggle to deal with the inherited trauma from her maternal lineage. She uses many coping mechanisms, which can be contradictory and inefficient, as is the nature of escaping the patterns of inheritance. Instead of rendering Blythe as an abuse-causing and erratic character, Audrain chooses to show her as an earnest woman struggling as a mother, uninformed and unsupported emotionally. Among the major ways Blythe uses as her coping strategy is her behavior of resistance, where she begins her experiences as a mother defying her mother's ways and believing that her knowledge is an efficient shield for her daughter against the negative experiences of life, as her mother had undergone. But the Trauma Theory states that the experiences of the past, left untreated, become an unseen force that sabotages the best of plans and intentions.

Emotional withdrawal can be viewed as another coping mechanism, too. Emotional withdrawal on the part of the mother, Blythe, serves as a way to protect herself from the emotional turmoil caused by her child and her own failure to be an ideal mother. In fact, the detachment the mother feels towards her child was the kind of emotional neglect the former had to face when she was a child, too. In the feminist study of the novel, the emotional withdrawal exhibited by the characters of the mother and the husband serves to defy the notion built by the patriarchal culture, according to which the ideal mother will always have an endless amount of love and emotional accommodation towards her children. Guilt and self-blame can also serve as an important means by which the characters can express their emotional coping mechanisms and preparations for the eventual break-up, which will eventually follow anyway due to the impossible standards to which they are forced to live up through patriarchal and societal norms and compulsions, including the lack of acceptance towards the presence of maternal ambivalence by the

patriarchal and societal constructs and compulsions reflected by the husband's disbelief and doubts surrounding the emotional withdrawal exhibited by the characters and the impossibility of the standards they are forced to live up through the relentless patriarchal compulsions and constructs surrounding childbirth and motherhood.

Despite the self-destructive nature of these coping strategies, there also come through in the novel self-aware qualities in Blythe. The voice in the novel shows a continued search on the part of the author in understanding the emotions she experiences and tracing them back to their origins. Though healing does not result from her self-reflection in the novel, it does symbolize a kind of resistance against the silence experienced by women and the characters in the novel. Through the narration in the novel and her telling of her experience, the characters in the novel resist the social taboo on the expression of "unacceptable" experiences by mothers and mothers-to-be in their culture. Ultimately, though, the coping mechanisms in the novel by the character Blythe fail in interrupting the intergenerational transmission of the trauma in the novel. The emotional turbulence and pain experienced by the character in the novel contribute significantly to the intergenerational continuation of the trauma in the novel. The lack of success in interrupting the intergenerational transmission of trauma in the novel through the actions and behavior in the novel does not symbolize a judgment on the behavior in the novel by Audrain

2. Discussion

Two scholarly studies have provided various critiques of the novel *The Push* by Ashley Audrain's portrayal of motherhood, yet both of them are limited in their analysis of literary criticism. The first, by Aditiya Gilang Rumpaka (2021), examines the protagonist's experience of postpartum depression and how she reconstructs her maternal self. Rumpaka utilizes Beck's Concept of Postpartum Depression, Freud's Theory of Personality, Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, and Stern's Theory of Motherhood Constellation to portray the psychological experience of the protagonist. The research relies mostly on psychological and clinical theories to unpack the mental illness problems of the protagonist and how she successfully conquered postpartum depression. However, the study doesn't include an application of literary theory, looking at the book only through a scientific perspective, without considering how the elements of narrative contribute towards thematic depth in the portrayal of motherhood in the book (Rumpaka, 2021:1). Vivien Sipos (2023) also speaks about the topic of motherhood in *The Push*. However, her study widens the scope to include various sources of influence on the maternal journey of the main character. Sipos highlights factors such as generational trauma, childhood neglect, and the absence of emotional support, investigating how these elements shape the main character's relationship with her daughter. Although Sipos provides a more nuanced understanding of the main character's development as a mother, her research lacks a coherent literary

framework. Instead, the analysis centers on social and psychological aspects without adequately addressing the author's narrative techniques that depict these complex dynamics (Sipos, 2023:1).

D. CONCLUSION

In *The Push*, Ashley Audrain has given the reader a brilliant portrayal of the kind of impact that intergenerational trauma can have on the concept of motherhood. In the story, the strategic incorporation of various literary techniques, including the non-linear structure of the plot, the use of symbolic space, the use of interior conflict, and complex characterization, highlights the kind of legacy of psychological trauma left on the mothering role by intergenerational trauma, which can disrupt the construct of this role through fear, guilt, and turmoil associated with emotional instability.

Moreover, the coping mechanisms employed by Blythe indicate the challenges involved in coping with or resisting generational trauma, especially when there is a lack of emotional support and recognition. Resistance, distancing, and self-blame portrayed in Blythe demonstrate generational trauma-induced responses, which have been formulated because of feminist concerns about maternal silences. It can thus be stated that this study confirms the fact that *The Push* subverts the ideal notion of motherhood, and generational trauma emerges as a crucial determining aspect of maternal identity." It can also be concluded that Audrain's *The Push* makes a crucial contribution to feminist literary studies about trauma and motherhood.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Audrain, A. (2021). *The Push*. New York, NY: Pamela Dorman Books.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*.
Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—
from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Hirsch, M. (2008). The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today*, 29(1), 103–
128. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>
- Kaplan, E. A. (2005). *Trauma culture: The politics of terror and loss in
media and literature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*.
New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.