

Representing Perpetrator Trauma in Ian McEwan's *The Children Act*

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Abstract—The concept of trauma explains a disruptive experience with belated effects that are hardly controlled or mastered. Trauma damages one's psychology by distorting the sense of self and the perception of the world. However, the application of conventional trauma theories focuses on the pains and sufferings in the victim's life only. It has been critiqued the reluctance to acknowledge that hurting others may cause some perpetrators to experience psychological injuries as well. Drawing on Dominick LaCapra's concepts of historical trauma and structural trauma, acting out and working through, as well as Judith Butler's concepts of posttraumatic symptoms, which are described as vulnerability, grief and aggression, this study inquires into the traumatic experience of the protagonist Fiona Maye in Ian McEwan's *The Children Act*. It aims to investigate how she transforms from a victim to a perpetrator within the context of trauma. Specifically, it explores how Fiona's personal traumas happened earlier in life are reactivated and drive her to take the role of a perpetrator, and to hurt Adam Henry with her coldness and aggression that facilitates Adam's death. Besides, the study also looks at how Fiona gets psychological injuries from her perpetrations. This study concludes that the perpetrator's aggression in this situation serves as a method of self-protection and release of her repressed trauma, but traumatizing others can never be the antidote for her plights, and she is inevitably traumatized by scheming and carrying out the villainies that hurt others.

Index Terms—perpetrator trauma, historical trauma, structural trauma, posttraumatic symptoms, *The Children Act*

I. INTRODUCTION

Judith Herman (1992) characterizes psychological trauma as extraordinary, not because it rarely occurs, but because trauma has the power to overwhelm an individual's adaptation to life and destroy their sense of control, connection and meaning. People who experience trauma are confronted with extremities of helplessness and terror and evoke the responses of catastrophe (p. 33). The flourishing of trauma studies has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualizing trauma within in the certain contexts of history, politics, ethics and aesthetics. Anne Whitehead (2004) asserts that 'trauma fiction' has 'been marked or changed by its encounter with trauma' (p. 3), signaling the progress of trauma studies 'from medical and scientific discourse to the field of literary studies' (p. 4). Michelle Balaev (2008) emphasizes the depiction of individual or collective loss and intense fear in defining a 'trauma novel', and its intrinsic characteristic lies in the illumination of the completed alteration of the protagonist's identity triggered by an external and terrifying encounter (such as wars and violence). It sheds light on the process of reconciling with the dynamics of memory that reshapes the characters' perceptions of themselves and the world. Many literary works have portrayed trauma with different contexts, to name a few, the domestic violence, incestuous rape, and systemic racism, the attachment trauma and secure base (Dodhy, 2018) in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), the gender oppression and deaths desires in female terrorist attacks (Amalia et al., 2020), as well the perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS) and moral injury of Nazi genocide perpetrators (Sevillano, 2021). Their descriptions of various traumas enable us to realize the diversity of human lives and the vulnerability of human beings, and provide an opening for me to explore

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psychological trauma in In McEwan's novel.

Being one of the foremost contemporary British novelists with highly sense of responsibility, Ian McEwan—the “National Writer” (Cowley, 2005) and one of the “50 greatest British writer since 1945” (*The Times*, Jan 5, 2008) —takes an active part in the construction of the British society by means of trauma writing. In *Writing as Reparation: Biographical Trauma Writing in Ian McEwan's Atonement*, Abreu examines the vulnerability and neurological disorder (vascular dementia) caused by biological trauma in wars; while Ganteau regards *Atonement* as a novel dominated by the image of wound functions as inspiration and narrative fuel. The romance trauma and war trauma, also the important themes of this novel, are analyzed in Miller's *Some Versions of Romance Trauma as Generated by Realist Detail in Ian McEwan's Atonement* and Crosthwaite's *Speed, War, And Traumatic Affect: Reading Ian McEwan's Atonement*. In the novel *Enduring Love*, there is violent trauma caused by a hot air balloon accident and stalking that lead the characters to lose control of their life as discussed in Sini Mononen's *Listening to the Resonance: Representation of Traumatic Experience in the Film Enduring Love*. Besides physical violence, the trauma resulted from broken family and emotional abuse has also been represented in the two novels mentioned above is examined by Wang Zhaorun in *Ian McEwan's Trauma Writing*. Guo Xianjin explores the victim of the patriarchy and sexual abuse within a male-dominated world as portrayed in the novel *The Comfort of The Strangers*. These studies have offer valuable insights into the vulnerability, the psychological struggles, and the repetitive memories within McEwan's narrative.

This issue is also portrayed in *The Children Act* (2014), where physical and psychological traumas of leukemia, conflicts between religious beliefs and secular welfare of children and women, including education, medical treatment, and life style that go against the doctrines, as well as people's marital problems, emotional collisions, and ethical dilemmas are highlighted. *The Children Act* delves into the ways in which trauma can reshape one's perception of the world, the others and the self, by revealing how traumatic experience in Fiona's marital life can lead a loss in herself, an exposure of her vulnerability, as well as a constant struggle for working through. Meanwhile, as the presiding judge who oversees Adam's blood transfusion case, Fiona assumed the role of a savior by issuing a wise ruling mandating that the transfusion to be performed, which is highly praised by both professionals and publics as told in the text. Besides, Adam also takes Fiona as a spiritual guide who provided him with substantial support and encouragement as he sought to embrace a new life unencumbered by past constraints, although she never gave any response to his letters of asking for help or expressing emotions.

As Fiona is grappling with marital trauma when her husband Jack's betrayal disappointed her, Adam's paranoid tendency to be with her results in Fiona's fluctuation between renewed and long-forgotten powerful romantic emotions, as well as moral restraint. Without seriously thinking about Adam's real needs, Fiona simply takes his approaching as a posture of romantic love. Considering her own professional standing and complicated marital situation, Fiona finally rejected Adam's request to be with her, but compulsively gave him a kiss on the lips, which is extreme unethical and irresponsible.

From Adam's perspective, Fiona's actions are heartless betrayal that facilitates his collapse of faith. By Fiona's judgement, Adam is once encouraged to break away the religious doctrines that once confined him and nearly took his life away, and he regarded Fiona as a reliable friend who understands his pains and fears. However, he finally found that Fiona never truly cared about him and mistook his following as a posture of romantic affair. After cutting ties with his parents and the old religious community, he sought encouragement and truth in Fiona, only to be met with her indifferent ignorance and misunderstanding. And the kiss on the lips, indicates that Adam himself is never been understood by anyone, even Fiona, the one he trusts most. This left him feeling absolutely isolated and devoid of hope once again, and it ultimately overwhelming despair resulted in his eventual demise. In this way, Fiona finally took the role of a perpetrator by inflicting trauma upon Adam Henry, aggravating his sense of isolation and helplessness, thus facilitated his choice of giving up live. And Fiona, who once indifferently sent him away and witnessed him struggling through the psychological trauma, is inevitably traumatized by her wrong deeds that facilitates Adam's despairing death.

In this sense, trauma in this novel goes beyond the victim's experience but reaches the perpetrator's ethical dilemmas, pains, regrets and reconciliation after hurting others. Therefore, *The Children Act* (2014) is a reminder that trauma is not limited to the victim's painful experience; instead, it goes far enough to reshape the perpetrator's perception of the external world, affects their choice in dealing with interpersonal issues and changes their mind in considering an individual's well-being.

Previous researches on *The Children Act* (2014) are based on the psychological injuries that the characters often embody. In light of François Jullien's concepts of rift, Laurent Mellet (2017) investigates how verbal violence plays a significant role in the novel by threading the characters' performance and intimacy, certainty, and fresh experiences in both public and private aspects. He suggests that the novel represents a change of characters' a new way of self-preservation in connecting with others, that is, to keep distance from the other, however, that very distance just leads to new form of violence and create rift that lies in unethical unfaithfulness and their past life. The finding of this study reminds us that not only the violent actions or harsh languages can hurt others, in some contexts, the distance will be seen as cold violence. This study has explored the issue of violence in this novel, but it didn't see the traumatic effects brought by the various forms of violence.

Moreover, Hejaz and Singh (2022), in the article entitled *The Therapeutic Power of Poetry in Ian McEwan's Saturday and The Children Act*, evaluate the power of Matthew Arnold's poetry in illness healing, asserting that literary

and creative art forms such as poetry have the power to engender epiphanic experiences and encourage the sick during their clinical practices. The scope of this study is limited to the poetry therapy used in treating people's physical illness as depicted in literary works, and the word 'trauma' has not emerged. However, it offers great inspiration to explore the power of other forms of art in trauma healing (both physically and psychologically) and the humanitarian interactions between the physician and patients, which improve the recovery process. In the article entitled *Relativisation of Authorities in the Postmodern Era: Ian McEwan's The Children Act*, Jelena Jančićjević proposes a more optimistic solution to achieve self-autonomy for victims involved in the struggle for supremacy between different socio-regulatory authorities, that is, to 'achieve internal stability by building their own moral standards, despite the conflicts and contradictions of the surrounding world' (2015, p. 205).

As mentioned above, this novel has already been examined from several perspectives, and previous studies encourage us to consider how the characters' lives are influenced by external factors such as sociopolitical factors, religious beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and so on, which requires us to place the characters in a global historical context and consider how their lives are intertwined with those of others. In addition, their study focus, such as sensory memory, secondary melancholy, anxiety, conflicts, and ethical dilemmas have proved the complicated personality of the main characters and touched on some levels of psychological injuries. Besides, the examination of the characters' psychological crises and how their lives are reshaped by these events has raised attention to its limitations. Although we expect the characters to have trauma as victims, we never ask whether they can experience trauma by inflicting pain on others. Indeed, if we consider trauma in perpetration, it is usually to investigate whether a terrible life experience can drive a person towards wrongdoings.

Therefore, to fill the gap in the existing research, this study conducted a psychological analysis of *The Children Act*, with specific emphasis on the protagonist Fiona Maye's experience of trauma as a perpetrator who unintentionally hurt Adam Henry and facilitated his death. Through the lens of *historical trauma*, *structural trauma* by Dominick LaCapra and posttraumatic symptoms that are elaborated as *vulnerability*, *grief* and *aggression* proposed by Judith Butler, this study explores how Fiona's personal traumas earlier in life are reactivated and drive her towards hurting others, and how the perpetration of wrongdoing causes her psychological injury. This study is guided by the following three research questions: (1) What type of traumas has Fiona Maye experienced in the past, and how does she process these traumatic events? (2) How are Fiona Maye's traumas reactivated, and how are her aggressions provoked to trigger her to hurt others? (3) What traumatic outcomes will Fiona Maye confront after hurting others?

This study argues that Fiona is not a perpetrator born to be evil; instead, her indifference and aggression are for self-protection. It is her miserable marital condition and the witnessing of too many sufferings in court that traumatized her deeply and twisted her perception of interpersonal relationships, especially the ties between man and woman. To avoid a relationship that may hurt her, she reacts with aggression and coldness, both of which may hurt others simultaneously. Traumatizing others cannot prevent her from suffering, and she is inevitably traumatized by perpetrating wrongdoings.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

LaCapra once refused to acknowledge the existence of perpetrator trauma, asserting that 'Nazi ideology and practice were geared to creating perpetrators able to combine extreme, traumatizing, radically aggressive acts of violence with hardness that ... foreclosed traumatization of the perpetrator' (p. 113). However, in 2014, he changed his perspective, not only admitting to the 'possibility of perpetrator trauma' (p. 79) but also emphasizing that only those who can acknowledge their trauma from past implications in deadly ideologies and actions will have chances to work through it as the victim trauma.

LaCapra's (2014) clarification of historical/structural trauma and analysis of trauma processes helped his study break free from the category of personal psychoanalysis and reach the social-political dimension in which the individual's trauma is associated with his responsibility to others. By relating traumatic memory to subconsciousness, as previous scholars have conducted, he asserts the possibility that people are mired in the traumatic experience of their lack of cognitive ability to reconcile with that very event. Historical trauma is caused by a particular event, such as the Holocaust, apartheid, violent assaults or disease that is specific and exclusive because not everyone has these experiences (p. 79). Conversely, structural trauma is more than a single event but 'an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization' (p. 82). To elucidate these two terms, he elaborates on the distinction between absence and loss. Loss is a result of specific traumatic events (p. 64), therefore, it can be narrated, reactivated, reconfigured and transformed in the present or future. In contrast, absence, a fictive circumstance that never exists, is a transhistorical term without tense or location that cannot be traced to a particular experience (p. 49). He also reinvestigated the correlation between acting out and working through traumatic loss and its significance in ethics and politics. Acting out means an obsessively compulsive repetition of the traumatic experience (p. 143), whereas working through is an open, self-questioning process to realize the trauma and its aftermath in an attempt to relive a normal life (p. 144).

Judith Butler, the pioneer of the Queer Movement, is famous for her achievements in gender studies, feminism and contemporary politics and ethics. Her book *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* was published in 2004 in response to the social-political vulnerability and aggression caused by the 9/11 terrorist attack, which claims

her deliberation on the correlation between the vulnerability brought by personal trauma and the resultant aggression when examining the political causality in traumatic loss and violence/retribution. These concepts are suitable for exploring the causes of the transformation of Fiona Maye from a victim to perpetrator and the reasons why she fails to be saved by her own perpetrations.

Butler believes that each human is partly constituted by traumatic loss and vulnerability because when we attach to others, we risk losing the attachment or being exposed to violence (p. 20). Traumatic loss is always followed by grief, which displays the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, and cannot always be explained or recounted. The feeling of grief often interrupts our self-consciousness, and always challenge the notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control (p. 23). To prevent radical thoughts and actions, it is vital to identify the root causes of violence and “offer another vision of the future than that which perpetrates violence in the name of denying it” (p. 18). This way, she also provides a solution for people to get through their trauma, that is, instead of becoming aggressive and traumatizing others, they should dig up the underlying causes of their own traumas.

On the basis of the aforementioned concepts, this paper examines how the perpetrator’s psychological trauma is narrated, reactivated, reconfigured and transformed in *The Children Act*. The concepts of LaCapra’s historical trauma, structural trauma and loss explain Fiona Maye’s personal trauma earlier in life. However, not everyone can work through trauma successfully; some survivors suffer from acting out of the traumatic past in daily life, and as revealed by Butler (2014), the vulnerability exposed in the trauma may impede the traumatized person from enquiring into the actual causes of the events and even provoke her aggression, which finally makes her hurt others for self-protection. However, being traumatized does not license anyone to inflict trauma on others. Therefore, the perpetrator must face the painful consequences of her own perpetration.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted through a textual analysis of *The Children Act*. As this study chooses to investigate Fiona’s trauma, it will first examine the concepts of historical trauma, and structural trauma by analyzing her personal experience. Fiona Maye, a female leading High Court judge, although renowned for fierce intelligence and sensitivity, is unavoidably hurt by the traumas that resulted from her failed marriage and her work. Next, it investigates how her trauma is acting out and then reactivated in some specific situations that finally trigger her to inflict trauma upon Adam Henry. This part will be analyzed using the concept of posttraumatic symptoms, including aggression, loss and vulnerability. Finally, it explores how Fiona’s perpetrator traumas are acting out and then working through the enhanced traumatic symptoms led by her perpetration.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a woman approaching sixty who suddenly suffers from her husband’s extramarital affair and her underlying concerns of infertility has been provoked, Fiona’s trauma results from failing marriage runs throughout the novel. Meanwhile, as the leading judge of the Family Proceedings Court who constantly brings “reasonableness to helpless situations” (McEwan, 2014, p. 4), Fiona has no choice but to witness or participate in violent domestic fights, seeing the subsequently traumatized children, and resolving conflicts regarding the well-being of those children, all of which have led her to feel empathic unsettlement and indirectly experience the trauma.

A. Trauma in the Earlier Life

Fiona first appears as a victim of her husband’s betrayal at the opening of the novel where we can see her “wheezy with outrage” (McEwan, 2014, p. 2) after her husband Jack’s shocking declaration of an extramarital affair. Fiona’s reaction at the moment supports LaCapra’s (2014) view on trauma, which is a disruptive experience, not only disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence, but also brings belated effects that can’t be controlled and may never be fully mastered (p. 96). She is definitely unprepared for it, as how Fiona thinks about the event, it “placed an impossible burden on her” (McEwan, 2014, p. 2) and disturbs her usually quiet life and poses a serious threat to her marriage. Despite Jack’s effort to win her understanding before he formally moving to his mistress, Fiona knows that “it would happen, with or without her consent” (p. 9).

However, Fiona doesn’t fully understand her trauma at the moment. In the next morning after Jack’s leaving, she remains “in shock, in an unreal state of acceptance”, and “felt the first conventional ache of abandonment” (McEwan, 2014, p. 60). The lonely wake-up in the morning reminded her the fact that her essential of Jack’s accompany was banished, and Jack’s ruthless silence (no email, no text, no phone call) shocked and disappointed her, she felt “a dark hollowing out, an emptiness falling away behind her, threatening to annihilate her past” (p. 83). As LaCapra (2004) asserts, trauma is a difficulty of magnitude, a shattering experience that disrupts or even threatens to destroy experience in the sense of an integrated or at least viably articulated life” (p. 117), as well as an “out-of-context” experience with an overwhelming power to distort the victim’s perception of others and the adaptations to daily life.

Since Fiona’s trauma is caused by specific event, it should be clarified into the category of historical trauma by LaCapra (2014); besides, it usually brings with loss, which occurs on a historical level and is the result of that specific occurrence that derails someone’s objectives, plans, or projects. As Butler (2004) claims, when people lose, they are

faced with something enigmatic, that is, the real thing hiding in their loss, and what is lost within their recesses of loss (pp. 21-22). Jack's disappearance suggests that Fiona's loss of her husband, but at the moment when he is leaving, Fiona hasn't realized what has really been lost in her life, and she is thus unable to comprehend why she is falling or worn out, and it is impossible for her to choose how to cope with this loss in a right way.

Although "for all the stupidity and dishonesty of the exchange, it was the only question and she'd invited it, but she felt irritated by him" (McEwan, *Children Act* 24), Fiona wants a demand explanation from Jack, but she still recoils from hearing the bad things. It is obvious that experiencing trauma exposes her vulnerability. As she is fear of being taken up or being infected in a morally perilous way by thinking of Jack's leaving, she has prevented to think about the real causes of her own sufferings. In fact, Fiona understands that she is partially responsible for Jack's betrayal, moreover, she can tell Jack is blaming her for ignoring his demand as well as his intention to win back her attention to family, but she refuses to think about it. Her reactions go against the direction of healing the trauma, as Butler (2004) argues, the traumatized people need to reach the "root" of their traumas so that they can find another vision of the future instead of hurting each other in the name of denying it, they should offer instead names for things that restrain them from thinking or acting radically and well about their future options (p. 18).

Fiona also could have sought help and comfort from her friends, like Herman (1992) asserts, the victim can tell the story of trauma in depth and detail, which is a work of reconstruction that can transform her memory of it then integrated into her life story, and in her telling, her story becomes a testimony as a ritual of healing, through storytelling (p. 167), she may "regain the world they have lost" (p. 170). But for Fiona, it's "too soon for sympathy or advice, too soon to hear Jack damned by loyal chums", rather than a social death caused by marital crisis, she prefers to suffer it "in an empty state, a condition of numbness" (McEwan, 2014, p. 58). Instead, she reacts it with aggression for the purpose of self-protection, getting in to a furious dispute with her husband, and even losing her mind and changed the locks of the door in an attempt to keep him out. She made an effort to convey her attitude and defend herself by her incisive language and forceful actions, but doing so only served to escalate the conflict. It is Fiona herself who closed the door for working the trauma through.

Although being tormented by her own marital trauma, Fiona is not afforded the luxury of time to indulge in her emotional wounds. Instead, she must immerse herself in the myriad legal documents that demand her attention. As a presiding judge in the family court, Fiona bears a solemn responsibility to safeguard the well-being of children, render just verdicts in marital disputes, and alleviate the suffering of women in the court. When dealing with these cases, she has seen "marital or partner breakdown and distress in Great Britain swelled like a freak spring tide, sweeping away entire households, scattering possessions and hopeful dreams, downing those without a powerful instinct for survival" (McEwan, 2014, p. 131), and "self-pity in others embarrassed her" (p. 7). These traumas involved in the cases that caused by spousal conflicts, illnesses, child abuse, and religious disputes, that attract the national attention and have influence on the masses of British society, as conceived by LaCapra (2014), refers to the enduring, systemic, and often hidden effects of traumatic events on collective identities, societies, and cultural practices, are defined as structural trauma (p. 79), which have also traumatized Fiona indirectly.

The collective pessimistic opinion on marriage has affected Fiona's attitude towards Jack's extramarital affairs, she can't resist imagining the scene of the unethical sexual life between Jack and his lover, holding disbelief in their mutual past. As Fiona thinks herself, "for all lifetime's entanglement in human weakness, she remained an innocent, mindlessly exempting herself and Jack from the general condition", but now, after internalizing the public utilitarian on marriage, Fiona changed her mind, as "these were new thoughts, this was how the worm of suspicion infested the past" (McEwan, 2014, p. 19). In this sense, Fiona can be defined as a victim of structural trauma.

The aforementioned experiences have had a profound impact on her perception of the external world, particularly with regards to comprehending the dynamics of male-female relationships and marital associations. Consequently, Fiona faces challenges in developing appropriate perspectives and strategies to address Jack's infidelity, and as a result, indirectly struggles with accurately identifying Adam's emotional investment. These factors, in turn, contribute to her failure to take the appropriate action when confronted with Adam's passionate following.

B. *From Victim to Perpetrator*

Adam is raised in a fundamentalist Christian community as a Jehovah's Witness descendent, and all through his childhood he has been kept in "an uninterrupted monochrome exposure to a forceful view of the world" (McEwan, 2014, pp. 122-123). His exposure to such condition is so pervasive that he is unable to evade its influence. Consequently, when he suffers from leukemia, he chooses to adhere to the teachings of his church, thereby refusing blood transfusions, even at the cost of his own life. Therefore, the hospital initiates legal proceedings against his parents for the purpose to get legal approval to administer a forced blood transfusion, so that they can save his life. Out of concern for his welfare, Fiona decides to visit Adam in the hospital during the trial to decide whether to administer a blood transfusion against his wishes. And this is scene when Fiona first saw Adam in the hospital:

The place was in semidarkness but for the focused bright light around the bed. The life-support and monitoring equipment around the bed, the high stands, their feed lines and the glowing screens emanated a watchful presence, almost a silence. (McEwan, 2014, p. 99)

As McEwan (2014) says, "If Fiona's recollection of stepping into Adam Henry's room was confused, it was because of the disorienting contrasts" (p. 99). Adam's vulnerability and steadfastness in facing death impacts her deeply. Besides,

as Fiona sees, “spread about him on the sheets and spilling out into the shadows were books, pamphlets, a violin bow, a laptop, headphones, orange peel, sweet wrappers, a box of tissues, a sock, a notebook and many lined pages covered in writing. Ordinary teenage squalor, familiar to her from family visits” (p. 99), living in the dim and dismal hospital room, tormented by illness and pain, Adam never forgets to practice the violin. Despite growing up in a deeply religious environment, his hobbies and habits resemble those of secular high school students. The simple enthusiasm he displays when discussing music and poetry sharply contrasts with his calmness and maturity when talking about blood transfusions and death.

During the short meeting in the hospital where they talk about music, poetry, religion, and play violin together, Fiona possessed a profound comprehension of Adam’s fear for death, his vulnerability after suffering so many physical and psychological pains, as well as his fervent desire for life. Based on this, Fiona decided to support the hospital’s claim to force a blood transfusion on Adam to save his life and protect him from further physical trauma. Although the administration of the blood transfusion proves efficacious in addressing Adam’s physical illness, his psychological trauma is far more complex to heal.

The experience of returning to health makes Adam to reconsider his previous religious belief and decide to distance himself from Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, it is extremely traumatic for a teenager to leave his earlier life and the familiar community. Furthermore, the act of disavowing his religious ties implied a distancing from his parents, who remain ardent members of the Jehovah’s Witness community. This rupture in his social ties engenders a state of emotional distress and existential confusion, as he became inscrutable to himself because he didn’t know who he is or what to do. According to Butler, individual is shaped to be socially vulnerable. Since the feeling of loss and vulnerability comes from being socially connected to others, we are at risk of losing these connections and also at risk of being attacked by violence because we are exposed to others (p. 20). At this moment, Adam is therefore extremely vulnerable as being in a state of abandonment and isolation.

Given the prevailing circumstances, Adam’s yearning for an urgent supportive network and guidance stems from the traumatic experiences he has endured. And in his mind, Fiona is the one who could provide him with the help he needed. By writing to Fiona, he attempts to working the trauma through by narrating his pains and repeating his trauma with consciousness, which according to LaCapra (2014), by utilizing language to provide some degree of conscious control, and by this, the traumatized individual can gradually get some critical distance on his situation and to discern between the past, present, and future (p. 90).

Fiona’s aggression firstly manifested as her ignorance of Adam’s asking for help in letters. Her disregard is not entirely a case of turning a blind eye. She reads every letter sent by Adam attentively, gaining insight into his recent developments, how he actively integrates into his new life, courageously breaking away from the past beliefs, his passion for music and art, as well as the hardships he encounters as a result. Meanwhile, she also realizes Adam’s unstable psychological conditions as he wrote:

feeling better, feeling happy and then sad and then happy again. Sometimes the idea of having a stranger’s blood inside me makes me sick, like drinking someone’s saliva. Or worse. I can’t get rid of the idea that transfusion is wrong but I don’t care anymore. (McEwan, 2014, p. 142)

Besides, the letters revealed Adam’s unusual trust and dependency on her.

On one hand, after reading the letters, she is touched by Adam’s innocence and enthusiasm. On the other hand, despite fully understanding Adam’s isolation and vulnerability, she does not respond. In fact, she has composed a reply but deems it insufficiently friendly, and thinks:

it wasn’t the friendliness that struck her, it was the coolness, the dud advice, the threefold impersonal use of “one,” the manufactured recollection. Better to send nothing at all than cast him down. If she changed her mind, she could write later”. (McEwan, 2014, p. 140)

Fiona really cares about Adam, but she is reluctant in getting involved. Engulfed in the crisis of her own marriage, she gradually forgets about Adam’s existence. When she receives another letter from Adam, “[h]er concern was greater” (p. 141), and it’s something she prefers to avoid. For Fiona, who is currently experiencing her own trauma and vulnerability, being cautious about engaging with others is her choice. Indifference serves as her best self-protection. Therefore, she chooses to ignore the plea of Adam.

Compared with her no response to his letters, the most severe trauma Fiona inflicted upon Adam is coldly sending him back to the old world that once confined him, and letting him helplessly struggle alone to survive. After many of Adam’s letters to her being unanswered, he secretly followed Fiona to Newcastle where Fiona is going for her business. Staying in Newcastle offers her the opportunity to review the old dream in her teenage and to temporarily forget about the bad moments with her husband Jack, offering the chance for her to refresh herself from the marital problems. However, the arrival of Adam served as a jarring reminder for her to return to reality that had been distressing and traumatic. It reactivated her traumatic memories of London where she was obsessed with work and let her marriage in a mess. Moreover, her loss of passion for marital life is reactivated by Adam’s crazy desire to be close to her. Contrasting sharply with Adam’s frantic pursuit Jack’s cold departure from her indicates that “[s]he remained betrayed” (McEwan, 2014, p. 133). Fiona consequently mistakes Adam’s action as an indication of romantic love and decides to refuse him immediately, but she uncontrollably gives him farewell with an unethical irresponsible kiss on his mouth.

For Adam, he didn’t hesitate to expose his vulnerability to Fiona, with the expectation of receiving assistance.

However, Fiona's avoidance and rejection served as a barrier to his hope, resulting in shock and disappointment for Adam, asking Fiona "Is that is then?" (McEwan, 2014, p. 168). His faith of the future collapsed at that moment when Fiona sent him away. He struggles to work through the traumatic past and adapt to new life in a secular society, seeking empathy, understanding, and support from a wise and trustworthy elder. However, Fiona never seriously considered his feelings. Grappling in her own marital crisis and being disappointed by the faded emotions with her husband, Fiona simply takes Adam's following as a posture of romantic love. As an old woman of her sixties who is nearly deserted by her husband, Fiona mistakes Adam's following as a posture of romantic feeling, a proof of her own charm that "she should have been flattered" (McEwan, 2014, p. 212), and from which she can't resist but to seek comfort. When she kissed him, Fiona feels that "the softness of his lips that overlay their suppleness, all the years, all the life, that separated her from him" (McEwan, 2014, p. 169). Meanwhile, for the purpose of preventing herself from profession crisis, she chooses to react with coldness and indifference, turning him away and, in doing so, forcefully revert him to a collapsed old world undermined his progress.

Fiona rejected to see how Adam's primary vulnerability that is exploited and exploitable, thwarted and denied, so that she couldn't really understand how he has suffered from the oppression from the old community, and finally ignored his helplessness and needs. In this sense, Fiona's refusal is an act of emotional violence that enhances Adam's trauma. In desperation and helplessness, Adam's leukemia relapsed, and this time, he refused the treatment. In fact, these behaviors of Fiona when confronting with helpless Adam is a kind of aggression, that is, to take his following as a comfort, but turn him away coldly. At this point, Fiona is the perpetrator who unconsciously but actually pushed Adam into the abyss of despair and indirectly caused his death.

C. Perpetrator Trauma

Fiona was caught in the confusion about herself as she thought "she didn't understand her own behavior... it was the horror of what might have come about, the ludicrous and shameful transgression of professional ethics, that occupied her" (McEwan, 2014, pp. 172-173). She can't resist but repeatedly imagining the bad moments that haven't come yet, is explained by LaCapra (2014) as acting out, within which the traumatic event is performatively regenerated or relived as if were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed (p. 70).

Fiona's trauma is totally provoked when the terrible news of Adam's death arrived on the day of the Christmas concert, just as she was about to take the stage, but "she found it hard to concentrate on what he was saying, though she thought she had grasped it" (McEwan, 2014, p. 197). Adam's death was too shocking and unbelievable so as to overwhelmed her, just as Caruth (1996) claims, the event "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor", for the traumatized person, "it was precisely not known in the first instance" (p. 4), but it would surely return to haunt her later on.

Fiona looked pale as she was to collapse. Sitting on the piano stool, she "drew a deep breath and softly exhaled to purge herself of the last scraps of recent conversation" (McEwan, 2014, p. 198), she forced herself to concentrate on the perform, meanwhile, she felt "only faintly aware that something waited for her return, for it lay far below her, an alien speck on a familiar landscape" (p. 199), and she couldn't tell if it was really there or really true. This is one of the most typical posttraumatic symptoms, she is too much disrupted and dissociated so that she could hardly accept the truth, which, as LaCapra (2014) asserts, is because that one's trauma has invited distortion, disrupted genres or bounded areas, and threatened to collapse distinctions between reality and illusion (p. 96).

Fiona eventually came to terms with Adam's death after the performance, but the trauma remained uncontrollable and intolerable:

her gaze settled, for no particular reason, ..., her mind a merciful blank. ... She had forgotten the concert. If it was neurologically possible not to think, she had no thoughts. Minutes passed. Impossible to know how many. (McEwan, 2014, p. 202)

All signs indicated that Fiona has already completely collapsed when confronting with the sudden trauma, which supports Butler's (2004) description of the effects of loss on individuals, that is, the "experience of transformation deconstitutes choice" (p. 21) that is larger than one's plan, one's project, even one's knowing, so that people can't choose how to react with it when they are hit by loss, they simply find themselves fallen and exhausted.

The pain and remorse were so intense that she felt she was being crushed by the world "filled with such detail, such tiny points of human frailty" (McEwan, 2014, p. 210). She definitely felt trauma, but failed to express it when Jack asked, there was a dissociation of affect and representation brought about by her trauma: she disorientingly felt what she couldn't represent and numbingly represented what she couldn't feel, and to some extent, the counteract, reenactment, or acting out of this disabling dissociation may be a part of her working through.

Under Jack's inquiry, Fiona began to talk about the things happened between Adam and her, and through her speaking out, she made her testimony of a perpetrator, which is crucial for oneself in the endeavor to comprehend her traumatic experience and its aftermaths, particularly the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with—or denying and repressing—the past (LaCapra, 2014, p. 82). It works on the transition of Fiona's compulsively reliving the past to her position of a survivor and agent in the present because of its dialogic interaction to attentive, empathic listeners.

She defined Adam's death as suicide, letting out "a terrible sound, a smothered howl" and socking herself in "the furthest extreme of grief" (McEwan, 2014, p. 211), and the grief displayed the enslavement that came from her relations with others, which couldn't always be explained or recalled, was frequently interrupted by self-consciousness, and constantly challenged herself as autonomous and in control (Butler, 2004, p. 23). For this reason, she was finally "beyond speech and the crying would not stop and she could not bear any longer to be seen" (McEwan, 2014, p. 211).

When Fiona lied down on her bed, Adam reappeared in her dream. She saw the frail boy returning to the community to be with his parents and the elders in Jehovah's Witnesses, believing that he was using the faith "as the perfect cover to destroy himself" (McEwan, 2014, p. 211), she also recalled the scene of their first meet in the ICU, which indicate that her trauma is acting out, and in this stage, instead of being represented in memory and inscription, the traumatic past was performatively revived or relived as if it were completely present. Additionally, it hauntingly reappeared as the repressed (LaCapra, 2014, p. 70).

While she was half-asleep, Fiona started to consider her role in the series of events that led to Adam's desperate death. She imagined Adam hovering outside her window, thinking about his desire, recalling the kiss "on a powerful and unforgivable impulse" (McEwan, 2014, p. 212), and reflecting on her own selfishness and indifference. She also has had a new perspective on the idea of the children's well-being. In the silence of the night following a downpour, Jack lies down beside her and hold her in his arm, Fiona felt their marriage uneasily resumed yet the familiar situation offered her a feeling of security.

And she began to tell Jack about her shame, Adam's passion for life, and her role in his death, in this way, she has gradually realized her own trauma, and stepped on the journey of working through, that is, what LaCapra (2014) has ever told us—the perpetrator may have experienced trauma that needed to be acknowledged and perhaps even work through under the condition that they could disassociate themselves from the prior involvement in the deadly ideologies and practices (p. 79).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Ian McEwan's portrayal of the characters' traumatic journey reveals his understanding of how people can overcome their flaws to find happiness (Lin, 2015, p. 48). *The Children Act* continues McEwan's focus on the character's deep psychological trauma, which runs through his early writings, such as Stephen in *The Child in Time* and Maria and Leonard in *The Innocent* (Malcolm, 2019, p. 106). Applying Dominick LaCapra's concepts of historical trauma and structural trauma, acting out, and working through, as well as Judith Butler's concepts of posttraumatic symptoms including vulnerability, aggression and grief, this paper examines Fiona Maye's personal traumatic experience, specifically, it looks at how Fiona's personal traumas happened earlier in life are reactivated that drive her to take the role of a perpetrator and to hurt Adam Henry with her coldness and aggression that facilitates Adam's death; it also examines the psychological injuries Fiona gets from her own perpetrations. This study concludes that the perpetrator's aggression in this situation serves as a method of self-protection and release of her repressed trauma, but traumatizing others can never be the antidote for her plights, and she is inevitably traumatized by scheming and carrying out the villainies that hurts others.

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