



# A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY ON THE POST TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN IN NICCOLO AMMANITI'S *I'M NOT SCARED*

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**Abstract:** Literature makes multiple attempts to shape the lives of human beings. A literary work can be approached through multiple perspectives. Sociological and moralistic approaches take dominant roles in the study of any work of literature. The contemporary writers give more space to the inner development of the characters. In the modern era, psychoanalytical studies of characters have gained momentum in literary studies. The focus on childhood and family trauma facilitates a reorientation towards specific rather than overly tropological and abstract dimensions of trauma. This paper attempts to explore the novel *I'm Not Scared* by Niccolò Ammaniti in the light of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Through a detailed analysis of the character of the protagonist, this paper attempts to highlight the childhood trauma experienced by the children, which has a long-term impact almost throughout the lives of the children. It may include dangerous and life-threatening situations which lead the children into traumatic experiences.

**Keywords - Trauma, Intrusion, Avoidance, Negative cognitions, Arousal, Reactivity.**

Italian Literature refers to the body of literature written and produced in Italy and by Italian writers, from the thirteenth century. *Ritmo Laurenziano* is the first document of Italian literature. Themes of Italian Literature include loss of self, isolation, and pleasure of the people. Children's Literature emerged in Italy between the political unification of the country in 1861 and the beginning of fascism in 1922.

Niccolò Ammaniti is an Italian writer. He was born in Rome in 1966. His notable works are *Steal You Away* (1999), *I'm Not Scared* (2001), *Die Herren des Hügles* (2003), *Crimini* (2005), *The Crossroads* (2006), *Let the Games Begin* (2009), *Me and You* (2010) and *Anna: Roman* (2018). He gained popularity in 2001 with his novel *I'm Not Scared* which was converted into a movie directed by Gabriele Salvatores. He has secured the Italian Viarggio - Repaci Prize for Fiction with his novel *I'm Not Scared*, which has been translated into thirty-five languages.

The novel *I'm Not Scared* is based on the loss of childhood innocence. It is about nine years old Michele Amitrano, who lives in a small southern Italian village called *Acqua Traversa*. His family includes his father Pino Amitrano, a truck driver; his mother Teresa Amitrano, a housewife and his sister Maria Amitrano. His father, along with some people of their village, kidnaps a boy named Filippo Carducci from a wealthy Northern family and Michele discovers this. Michele loses his childhood innocence after witnessing this and his actions upon his conscience lead him to go against his father and society.

Trauma has become an often-recorded subject in the twentieth century. Trauma studies have become a novel area of study in literature. It can be explored from various outlooks, such as frightening experiences and harmful events. In *Wounds and Words*, Christa Schönfelder states, "The focus on childhood and family trauma facilitates a reorientation towards specific rather than overly tropological and abstract dimensions of trauma" (13). The focal point of this article is on the literary approaches to trauma at an individual or personal level. Individual domestic trauma plays a vital role in literary approaches. Personal traumas are witnessed by children most often within the family, which are based on the exposed actualities of family trauma.

Trauma is an event in the life of an individual defined by its intensity. Psychoanalytical studies on childhood trauma explore the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of children about their childhood experiences of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. They get disturbed thoughts and feelings related to their childhood traumatic experiences. Since they have witnessed strong negative emotions related to their childhood terrifying events, they are unable to be optimistic. Hence, they estrange themselves from others and lead their lives into difficult situations, and experience the severity of trauma.

Trauma studies reflect on how the traumatic effects on an individual affect the whole family and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is considered to be the result of long-term effects. Studies on PTSD explore the traumatic stress of an individual and its impacts on society. It is stimulated through experiencing or witnessing threatening events. It is initiated with terrifying events and it affects the psyche of the individual. It can last for months and at times, for years. It merges with the individual's mundane life and controls the capacity of the individual who is affected by the trauma.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is known by various names such as 'shell shock,' 'combat fatigue' and 'battle fatigue.' The term shell shock was introduced in 1915 in medical literature and has been used during the years of the World War I and the term combat fatigue has been used after the World War II. It is identified by the inability to succeed after experiencing or witnessing harmful and threatening events. It may be caused by fear, anxiety, past events, social isolation, longing for love, alienation, the sudden transformation of loved ones, guilty consciousness, sexual abuse, and painful experiences. Psychoanalytical studies on PTSD center on post-traumatic emotional detachments or undesirable thoughts. Eventually the traumatized individual senses detachment from others.

Peter Barry, in his *Beginning Theory*, defines the psyche of individuals as "the part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions" (92). Further, in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton considers the psyche of individuals as "a crisis of human relationships, and the human personality, as well as a social convulsion" (131). He further opines, "Equally serious is the complaint that psychology as a medical practice is a form of oppressive social control, labeling individuals and forcing them to conform to arbitrary definitions of 'normality'" (141). The study of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder explores a long-lasting trauma and is associated with traumatic events. The symptoms of PTSD are grouped into four major clusters. They are intrusive memory, avoidance, negative cognitions and mood, and arousal and reactivity.

An intrusive memory of a traumatic event focuses on fearful thoughts or harmful events of the past which capture those events repeatedly as thoughts in the present as well as the future. Childhood trauma plays a major role in the intrusion. Disturbing thoughts take a hold on the life of the affected child and a single element from their past triggers them to hurt themselves in the present. It may be caused by nightmares as well. In the novel, Michele suspects that Filippo is his brother and he has been hidden by his father because he is mad and may frighten his sister Maria. Due to his suspicion and fearful thoughts, he feels that his father can stay in the desert than in his house.

Avoidance is one of the major symptoms of traumatic disorders. The affected people instinctively avoid their family members. They may face irritability and trouble throughout their life and avoid situations that bring back memories of the traumatic events. They refuse to blend with family and society, they feel detached and alienated throughout their lives. In *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*, Rob Lapsley says, "Alienation is a central preoccupation of modern culture" (75), Michele likes his parents but they do not give him much affection.

Michele once tries to kiss his father but his father does not allow him to do so, as he is dirty. "I sat on his knee too and tried to kiss him. 'Don't you kiss me, you're all dirty. If you want to kiss your father, you've got to wash first'" (34). This negligence makes him alienate himself. He states that he can live without a family like an orphan. He feels that whenever he does anything wrong, his father threatens that he would send him to the friars.

The negative cognitions and mood focus on the thoughts of the affected individuals in certain situations. They fail to appreciate the existing positive actions, instead, concentrate more on negative reactions. They often feel that they are responsible for the events that happened and as a result, they blame themselves and carry the guilt. Emotionally and mentally, they are separated from the world. Their focal point varies from ordinary people. Ultimately, they have a lack of interest in life and lack social support as well.

In *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler, a renowned psychoanalyst, says, "Psychoanalysis treats the subject not as a unique Essence but as the product of intersecting psyche, sexual, and linguistic mechanisms" (111). Adding more essence to this definition, Eagleton says, "it enacts human experience, or embodies an author's intention, or its structures reproduce the structures of the human mind" (157). In addition, Culler opines, "identity is based on personal qualities that are revealed DURING THE TRIBULATIONS OF A LIFE.... The fundamental identity of characters emerges as the result of actions, of struggles with the world, but then this identity is posited as the basis, even the cause of those actions" (112-113).

When Michele sees the video clipping of Filippo's mother and Filippo, he realizes that it is this love that he lacks in his family. He states, "You want him to take me away... You hate me. You're nasty. You and Papa hate me. I know you do" (97). This lack of affection in Michele's life makes him experience severe situations in life. He struggles to help Filippo, though he is worried about his father's threatening. In this process, Michele being a child loses his essence of childhood and possesses experiences that are beyond his capability.

Arousal and reactivity make the affected people hypersensitive. When their self-destructive behaviors, such as controlling anger, irritation, and negligence, burst out, they harm themselves and it leads to suicidal thoughts. They encounter sleep disorders and experience fear and sadness. Michele discovers the kidnapped boy in an abandoned house. He seems hypersensitive about Filippo and he states that the boy at the bottom of the hole belongs to him alone and it is his secret discovery.

Culler says, “identification brings the desirous subject into being, not the other way around” (116). Filippo is a desirous subject of Michele. He sets an aim to rescue Filippo from the kidnappers and wants to identify the reason behind this crime. He thinks that the kidnappers have held the nine years old boy as a ransom. At this stage, Michele witnesses an inner conflict between his secret discovery and his father. The act of rescuing Filippo leads to the killing of Michele by his father which is aimed at Filippo. Literary studies based on culture examine how the demands of group identity restrict individual possibilities. Culler furthers, “Identity and worth are thought to come from one’s feelings and personal qualities rather than from his or her place in the social hierarchy. This is an identity gained through love and centered in the domestic sphere rather than in society” (115). Though Michele is a small child, he can protect his own identity through his personal qualities. He can develop a thought to sacrifice his own life’s desires of childhood for the sake of Filippo. This shows that children desire to love and care from family and society. However, some children, like Michele, do not get the chance to experience it.

The study of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder argues that childhood trauma destructs the social fabric of an individual’s psyche. It begins after the traumatic events. Hence, the affected people can avoid certain circumstances which trigger the memory of their childhood trauma. They can avoid possible dangers from traumatic events through the moral support system of family and society. They must reduce the risk factors in their lives and improve their ability to manage strategies throughout their lives. The children are emotional and they yearn for affection and they get affected by constant negativities. It is the responsibility of the family and society to help them to overcome such obstacles.

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