

Post-traumatic Growth and Reconstruction of Values in The Shack Film

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Article Info

Article History

Received:
10 July 2024

Accepted:
28 November 2024

Keywords

Post-traumatic
growth,
Values
forgiveness,
Spiritual guidance,
Cinema.

Abstract

Trauma is used to name all kinds of events that leave deep scars in the mental and physical being of a person. It is a deep emotional and psychological wound experienced by the individual after an unexpected and shocking event or in the face of a situation involving physical and psychological threat. Such profound events can lead to the decline or complete breakdown of personal beliefs, values and social bonds. Cinema is one of the powerful artistic tools that can read individual and social changes. Thanks to its audiovisual effects, cinema offers the opportunity to analyze the mental state of the characters. The Shack, based on the novel by Paul Young, deals with the effects of the trauma of loss and how the individual emerges from this process and how values are rebuilt with spiritual guidance centering on the experiences of a father. The aim of the study is to reveal how the protagonist Mack's deep spiritual journey after the loss of his daughter leads him to re-establish family ties and core values such as love, justice, faith and forgiveness. This study is limited to the film The Shack (2017) and will be analyzed with the semiotics method.

To cite this article

Şahin A. (2024). Post-traumatic growth and reconstruction of values in the shack film. *International Journal of Academic Studies in Science and Education (IJASSE)*, 2(2), 153-173. <https://doi.org/10.55549/ijasse.27>

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Introduction

The word trauma is a term first used in medicine to describe physical injuries involving bone or tissue damage. In psychological and emotional contexts, it refers to a situation in which an individual's mental processes such as perception, feeling, thinking, memory or imagination are restricted or unable to function for a certain period or in the long term (Puppert, 2011). It is an unexpected event or situation that leads to serious physical and psychological consequences. Man-made traumas such as sexual assaults, wars, torture and violence or traumas resulting from natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and fires leave permanent deep scars on the body, mind and psyche regarding the perception the world. Especially when social position, professional status and belonging are threatened, the effect of these scars remains. Powerlessness, resignation, leaving oneself to the mercy of others, lack of trust (Fischer & Reidesser, 1998), pain, sleep disturbance, depression, anxiety, hypersensitivity, shock, obsession are some of the conditions caused by trauma. With traumatic events, values become worthless and beliefs weaken (Sztompka, 2000).

Considering that there is a belief under every value (Aydın, 2013), exposure to trauma destroys the knowledge of what is right and wrong, individual attitudes and behaviours criteria, and generalized moral rules (Köse & Dağyar, 2021). However, it has also been revealed that not only negative but also positive changes can be experienced after traumatic events, and that the person becomes stronger than before. The situation called post-traumatic growth is the idea that great good can come from great pain, the positive change experience that emerges as a result of struggling with the difficult life crisis after trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). How an individual can grow and change after a traumatic experience was organized into three main categories: changes in self-perception, such as becoming a better person, feeling strong and self-assured; becoming more considerate of other people; and changes in philosophy of life (spiritual change, rich spiritual life). This approach was categorized into five dimensions: 'personal power,' 'new possibilities,' 'relationships with others,' 'appreciation of life' and 'spiritual change' (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

In literature and religious teachings, it is frequently emphasized that human suffering brings one closer to knowledge, truth and God (Ezerbolat & Özpölat, 2016). As a branch of art, there are studies that address the process of reconstruction of post-traumatic values in cinema, which is the subject of the study, and show the change of the trauma process in self-discovery, personal development and relationships with others. The study titled 'A Review of the Film "Yuli" in Terms of Trauma, Growth and Creativity' tells the real life story of the famous dancer Carlos Acosta. His life is shaped by difficulties and traumatic experiences, especially during his childhood. The film shows Acosta's process of overcoming these difficulties and how he grows and matures in this process. Dance has been both an escape and a means of self-discovery for the character. In addition, there are also studies on healing from trauma and bereavement.

The study titled “An Analysis of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Three Colors: An Analysis of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Three Colors: Blue” within the framework of the concepts of ‘Trauma’, ‘Mourning’ and ‘Healing’” focuses on the story of Julie, the female character of the film, who loses her husband and daughter in a car accident, and the story of her recovery from this trauma. In a study by Becerikli and Boz (2019), the film ‘Butterflies’ (2018) seeks to explain concepts such as trauma, mourning and recovery through the experiences of adult characters. In addition, “The Pursuit of Happiness” (2006) deals with the efforts of a father struggling with financial difficulties and homelessness trying to build a better life for his son and his personal growth in this process. ‘The Impossible’ (2012) tells the true story of a family that survived the 2004 tsunami disaster. The film reveals how, in the aftermath of a traumatic disaster, family members strengthen their commitment to each other and learn to re-appreciate the value of life. These films and film studies reveal the effects of traumatic experiences on the spiritual and personal development of individuals.

A study looked at how Christian-based films have the potential to be applied as a spiritual discipline for spiritual growth. These films include *The Shack* (Booth, 2023). In this study, the movie *The Shack*, based on William P. Young's eponymous novel, will be analyzed in the context of post-traumatic growth, forgiveness, justice, and the reconstruction of faith values. The main reasons behind the choice of this film are that its story clearly reflects the individual and spiritual transformation, emphasizes the construction process of social values, offers rich content for semiotic analysis with its symbolic narrative, and emphasizes that trauma does not only have a negative aspect but also offers opportunities for learning and growth. The study is limited to the film *The Shack* and the film has been analysed with the semiotics method.

Trauma Phenomenon and Post-traumatic Growth

The concept of trauma is used to name all kinds of events that shake and injure the mental and physical being of the individual in many different ways. Turkish Language Association (TDK) defines the term trauma as a concussion, a local wound that disrupts the structure and form of a tissue or organ and occurs as a result of an external mechanical reaction, and as an disturbance (TDK, 2024). A severe event that cannot be integrated and assimilated is called a wound that is difficult to cope with according to the person's capacity to recover and handle (Bilgin, 2003). Traumatic events are long-lasting experiences that occur in a person in the face of a situation involving physical and psychological threat. Therefore, traumatic events that occur at a certain time deeply affect the individual physically and psychologically. The deep scars engraved on the psyche or body of the individual affect entirely his/her identity, thoughts and lifestyle and shape his/her whole life. (Satır, 2022). During the 19th century, ‘trauma’ meant a severe tear on the surface of the skin, an open wound and did not carry any psychological connotation (Jones & Wessly, 2007). Trauma has been described as a short-term,

reversible situation under the responsibility of the subject. The person with mental disorders either has a problem regarding his/her personality or is suffering from a biologically-induced disorder; therefore, in both cases, the cause of the problem is the person himself/herself (Micale, 1989). Subsequently, emphasis has shifted towards placing more value on the individual's experience. The concept of trauma, which was originally favored for physical injuries, has been suggested to involve psychological traumas through studies on 'hysteria'. Sigmund Freud, who was inspired by the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot's hysteria studies and focused on the causes of hysteria, stated in his work *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), published jointly with Joseph Breuer, that the disorder in question was caused by traumatic cases such as sexual harassment in the past (Micale 2001; Micale, 1989). Thereafter, he altered his opinion that the neurotic symptoms of hysteria were not caused by traumatic memories, but by repressed sexual desires. In other words, Freud's theory of trauma includes the suppression of the individual's desires. As a result, studies have defined trauma as a psychological state.

Trauma can be observed to be man-made and induced by natural causes. In addition to traumas caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and fires, man-made traumas such as war, torture, violence and sexual assaults leave deep scarring on an individual. Trauma is heavily shaped by the twentieth century and the war experiences it brought along with it (Aygan, 2024). Freud studied the effects of traumatic experiences on individuals after the First World War and analyzed recurring dreams after war or accidents, which terrified the patient each time again. According to Freud, these dreams are related to the fact that the traumatic event affects the individual deeply and the person is stuck in this trauma (Freud, 2012). Trauma, according to Freud's definition, turns into a phenomenon that overturns the individual's defense mechanisms and transcends the shield that protects the individual against the outside world that captures him/her permanently (Aygan, 2024). Since traumatic events are processed very differently from normal information processing, they are recalled over and over again through nightmares and instant flashbacks. The mental disorders experienced by soldiers who did not have any previous disorders such as decreased reactions after the war, loss of interest in the things they previously enjoyed, remembrance of wartime, and difficulty in fulfilling daily tasks (Özen, 2017) attracted the attention of psychiatrists, and these disorders were diagnosed as traumatic neurosis. In this respect, individuals are stated to react differently to the trauma experience such as post-traumatic stress disorder, psychological resilience, and post-traumatic growth (Erten & Kocakaya, 2020). In this regard, it is emphasized that the trauma experience operates differently from person to person and that individuals show different psychological reactions. While individuals may experience emotional and physical negative experiences after trauma, some people show resilience against difficulties such as spiritual change and appreciation of life after traumatic experience.

Post-traumatic growth has focused on the positive changes and achievements as a result of coping with trauma. Indeed, 'The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory and Identity in Japan', which examines the impact of traumatic events on shaping social structures and individual transformations, shows that Japan's historical wounds have shaped its national identity. It suggests that the traumatic past has a pedagogical function in the development of children in Japan (Hashimoto, 2015: 83). Psychological resilience and post-traumatic growth in disaster-exposed organisations: overview of the literature suggests that post-traumatic growth among rescue personnel is common at both personal and professional levels. This growth contributed to a greater appreciation of life and relationships, increased self-esteem and a better understanding of their work.

Experiences of coping with traumatic events strengthen employees' sense of commitment to society and help them value life more (Brooks et al., 2018). According to Janoff and Bulman (2004), through genuine support from others, many trauma victims are able to rebuild their inner world. In this process, a stronger psychological resilience, the ability to establish deep relationships, strengthening of family and community ties, and significant changes in their worldviews and perceptions of values are observed. According to the study of Dursun and Söylemez (2020), this restructuring process can lead the individual to a form of wisdom and make him/her more resilient against future challenges. In short, traumatic events, along with their negative aspects, also provide a function of making sense out of the pain experienced and reconstructing values and understanding of the world.

Making sense of traumatic events brings a sense of relief to a certain extent. In this case, values provide people a way of assessing the situations they encounter, and people acquire meaning through them by establishing a relationship with the emotions such as satisfaction, dissatisfaction, pleasure, sorrow that the situations arouse in them. For example, by developing a stance in the face of a painful event, a person has the potential to turn this situation in his/her favor and create a success story out of it. The key element here is that the person changes himself/herself, not the event (Erten & Kocakaya, 2020). In short, the values of the person reveal a meaning in the situations encountered. In this framework, individual's understanding affects his/her resilience against many adversities. Positive changes in interpersonal relationships, changes in self-perception, realization of the value of life, realization of the existence of alternative options and changes in the belief system are among the dimensions of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and also show the results of coping with difficulties.

Trauma and Cinema

The traumatic events experienced during the First and Second World Wars were reflected in literary works such as poetry, novels and plays. Trauma has become an interdisciplinary phenomenon by opening up to disciplines

such as history, art, cultural studies and literature, especially after the official definition of trauma made by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (Aygan, 2024). The manifestations of trauma, which have become an integral part of social life due to the disasters experienced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have been revealed through social structures such as religion, aesthetics and mass media. The aesthetic dimension plays an important role in the formation and intergenerational transmission of traumatic narratives; traumatic events gain functionality by being transformed into narrative through certain aesthetic forms (Alexander, 2012). Art forms such as movies, paintings and photographs have a critical importance in making trauma visible (Satır, 2022). It can create different indicators with its visual and auditory features, moving images, space, scenario, psychological and sociological factors, furniture design, etc (Üner & Erdoğan, 2021). In this way, cinema has a special importance among storytelling techniques.

Cinema creates emotional and mental reactions through the plot it conveys. It is a guiding communication tool that has a strong impact at both individual and societal levels in the transmission of inter-cultural information in the transmission of cultural and social messages. Cinema is also a powerful educational tool which is not independent of value judgments, ideological tendencies and attitudes. A film production reflects the beliefs, values and structures in the society and in this respect it serves as a witness for the society. Therefore, cinematographic productions are in line with the prevailing conditions and changes in society (Ateş, 2020). Films are used as a powerful tool to understand and describe the mental states of the characters. In this sense, they are texts that can clearly observe the changes experienced by the characters (Becerikli & Boz, 2019).

The Shack (2017 film)

The Shack has been directed by Stuart Hazeldine and is based on the 2007 novel of the same name by William P. Young. Baraka is the story of a protagonist who, through tragedy, pain, grief, doubt, unforgiveness and guilt, struggles with his relationship with God, himself, his family, his life and his faith. The first twenty minutes of the film give an idea of the contribution of Mack's past and present traumas to his faith and his relationship with God. As the story unfolds on screen, the audience journeys with Mack on a journey of healing and forgiveness with the Triune God. A process of liberation through an intimate encounter with the Triune God, addressing his past, facing his fears and accepting his imperfections frees Mack from the layered weights of despair. In turn, after significant loss and grief, he is renewed to see a hopeful future for himself and his family (Booth, 2023, 44).

Mackenzie "Mack" Phillips suffered from physical and emotional abuse as a child by his drunken father, who also abused his mother. Mackenzie "Mack" Phillips lives a fulfilling life with his wife Nan and children Kate, Josh and Missy. However, this peaceful life is wreaked havoc when Missy disappears during a camping trip.

In the aftermath, police find Missy's torn dress and a trail of blood in an abandoned cabin in the woods and conclude that the little girl was the victim of a serial killer. One day, Mack unexpectedly receives a typewritten message inviting him to meet him at the cabin. The message is signed "Father", the name Mack's wife Nan and his missing daughter Missy used for God. Mack initially thought of the message as an opportunity to confront and punish his daughter's killer. So he sets out on his journey. Along the way, he narrowly avoids a collision with a truck. When he reaches the cabin, he finds it empty, but at that moment he encounters a mysterious figure. This figure invites him to their home.

The mysterious trio at the house gradually reveals their identities to Mack: The African woman is God (the Father), the Middle Eastern man is Jesus and the Asian woman is the Holy Spirit. In the process, God, now in the form of an old native American man, leads Mack to the cave where Missy's body is found. Together, they buried Missy's body in the garden. Mack also encounters the wisdom of God, who appeared in the form of a woman named Sophia, in another cave. In this cave, Mack's confrontation with himself, his faith and his suffering deepens. Later in the journey, Mack encounters his father, who has mistreated him in the past and whom he finds it difficult to forgive. His father apologizes to Mack and Mack forgives him. Mack also faces his guilt for killing his father in the past and realizes that Missy's death was not a punishment for killing his father. In the end, Mack is able to overcome his deep grief and regain his faith. He says goodbye to the trio and sets off to return to his family. But on his way, he collides with the truck he had met earlier and loses consciousness, waking up in the hospital. Mack's friend tells him that he crashed on the way and never actually made it to the cabin. Later, Mack shares his spiritual journey with his wife Nan, and the movie ends with Mack going back to church with his family.

Method

This study is limited to the film *The Shack* and is analyzed by semiotics method. The theological messages of the film and criticisms about the characters of God are not included in the study. The sign emerges from the correlation between the 'signifier' representing the formal entity and the 'signified' representing the mental entity. Sign is like the front and back of a piece of paper, or the combination of an auditory image and a concept' (Barthes, 1979). Signs are actions that refer to something other than themselves, i.e. signification structures (Fiske, 2003). A sign is a meaningful entirety of various elements such as language, gestures, signs, traffic symbols, professional pennants, advertising posters, fashion, architecture, literature, painting and music, which people create and use for the purpose of communication, and which is expressed through tools such as sound, writing, image and movement (Rifat, 1992). It can also be defined as an object that shows something other than itself.

Semiotics, which is a branch of science that studies languages, icons and symbols, enables the discovery of the meaning behind the meaning of a text or image, rather than the obvious, apparent meaning of such text or image (Demir, 2009). The image or text has hidden, implicit meaning besides the content that is easily captured and perceived at first glance. Therefore, a flow runs from the visible to the invisible, from subjectivity to objectivity, from the concrete to the abstract, from the known to the unknown (Karaman, 2017). Semiotics suggests a view other than what is perceived at first glance. The signifier can be regarded as the material, tangible existence of a sign. The signified corresponds to the layer of meaning that the sign creates in the mind of the individual who perceives it. The semiotics method endeavors to make sense of signs by examining them in a specific context (Satır, 2019).

According to Barthes (2014), the denotation refers to what the sign represents, while the connotation refers to how the sign is represented. It is frequently used in film studies and advertisement analyses. The signs that constitute the production and transmission of meaning in cinema are divided into two as denotation and connotation. The concept of denotation refers to what we perceive directly from the whole of the scenes we encounter while watching the film. On the other hand, connotation can be summarized as the effort to find a meaning behind the images that appear as denotation in the script and storyline of the film (Aydingüler, 2023). Regardless of how the connotation covers the denotation, it does not absorb it (Barthes, 1979: 89). In cinema, the elements reflected on the screen are characterized as the denotation, while the thoughts and meanings that emerge in connection with this meaning are evaluated as signified. In this framework, the signs in the movie *The Shack* were analyzed according to the denotation/connotation analysis.

Various events, elements and symbols in the movie carry connotations beyond denotation. For example, the shack is not only a place of shelter but also symbolizes the protagonist's inner state. As a matter of fact, the depiction of *The Shack* as a cold snowy place and its depiction on a warm sunny day give insight into the state of the character. Likewise, the effect of the trauma experienced by the character is shown through elements such as birds and boats. The waterfall and water symbolize the character's inner purification on the level of connotation. The garden figure represents forgiveness and healing, and the characters of God represent guidance and help through different appearances. Therefore, the film elaborates on denotative and connotative meanings of the shack, waterfall, garden and God figures and explains each of them in terms of inner growth and transformation.

Results

Individual Collapse and The Shack

The film begins with Mack's childhood memories. His father, one of the elders of the church, appears to be a religious figure, but he secretly drinks alcohol and inflicts violence on his mother and Mack. One of Mack's most prominent childhood traumas occurred when he complained about his father to a priest. As a result of this complaint, his father physically abused Mack and forced him to repeat the text "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Colossians 3:20".



Figure 1. Mack's violence by his father

Mack, physically and emotionally scarred at the age of thirteen, poisoned his father's drink, causing his death. This concealed tragedy constitutes the root of the character's faith crisis. The phrase 'The secrets we keep have a way of clawing their way to the surface', which shapes the theme of the film, emphasises the inevitability of confronting traumas. Mack's experiences are concretely illustrated by his recurring dreams and memories. Mack's family life, unlike the traumas he experienced in his childhood, is built on love and happiness. Living a more peaceful life with his own family, Mack regularly attends church. However, Mack's religious beliefs are different from his wife's. She has a deeper relationship with God and addresses him as 'Father' when she prays. The relationship of their little daughter with God and her faith is considered as a feature that makes her special and different from their other children. While Mack admires his daughter's closeness to God, he continues to have gaps and questions in his own faith.

The biggest trauma in Mack's life was the event called 'The Great Sadness' in the film. While Mack was trying to save his son from a canoeing accident during a camping trip with his children, he realised that his little girl was missing when he returned. The searches led to the discovery of her daughter's dress and traces of blood in a shack in the woods. That event changed Mack's faith and the balance of his life. By focusing on the missing or deceased person, emotions are left in the void. An individual's life can lose its meaning without the person

who has died or who is gone. Following the shock, the processes of searching for the person, disorganization and despair, and then recovery come into play (Puppert, 2011). As a matter of fact, a similar situation is observed in the trauma experienced by the character as a result of the death of her daughter. The shack, after which the film *The Shack* is named, is one of its strong symbolic elements and represents a great pain for Mack, all the fears he had to face spiritually as well as his inner journey. The Shack is not only a physical space, but also has a strong symbolic meaning as a metaphor where Mack confronts his traumas, questions his relationship with God and comes to terms with his pain. In the first screening, the shack is an abandoned, dilapidated, dark, cold old place. This shows Mack's state after his loss.



Figure 2. The shack where Mack's daughter was killed

The fact that the shack is the place where Mack encounters God and experiences a spiritual transformation in the later stages of the film increases the symbolic importance of this place. As an abandoned, dilapidated structure, the shack reflects Mack's inner conflicts and emotional destruction. This place witnesses Mack's darkest times, both physically and spiritually. However, in the process, the shack becomes a symbol through which Mack purifies his thoughts, learns to forgive and achieves spiritual healing. As a matter of fact, in the film, the first place Mack goes to is depicted as a cold, snowy and tense environment, while the place where he encounters God is depicted as a warm, green and reassuring place. This contrast is a concrete reflection of the transformation Mack experiences in his inner world. In other words, *The Shack* is an indicator of both trauma and post-traumatic growth. Mack is shown as withdrawn with the disappearance of his daughter, his relationship with his children weakened, his faith in God shaken, his social ties weakened, in other words, he is portrayed as isolated. The disappearance of Mack's daughter, on whom he built himself and to whom he was attached, was the trauma that would rock the subject to the core (Özmen, 2017). In a sense, the traumatic event experienced caused a great destruction in Mack's life.

One of the turning points of the film is Mack's call to the shack with a note left in the mailbox and signed 'Father'. Hesitant at first, Mack decides to go to the shack after consulting his friend. This journey, and thus the traumatic loss, became an important turning point in the recognition of the self and its reconstruction (Becerikli & Boz, 2019). When he arrived at the hut, Mack tried to commit suicide; however, he abandoned this attempt with the appearance of a deer. In the film, there is a reference to the deer as the sacred animal of Artemis, the Goddess of the hunt. This Goddess appears to young people and animals at their most pivotal moments, helping them to prepare for their destiny (Ayan, 2021).



Figure 3. Encountering a deer during a suicide attempt

Spiritual Guidance and Reconstruction Process

Mack's recovery from trauma begins when God calls him on a spiritual journey. This process develops through interactions in which God appears in three different manifestations - God (the Father), Jesus Christ (the young man) and the Holy Spirit (the young woman). These divine figures know even the smallest details of Mack's life. The Father figure takes the form of an African woman who helped Mack when he was young, but over time he can appear in other forms such as a middle-aged man. The Holy Spirit takes the form of a young Asian girl and Jesus appears as a young Middle Eastern man. When Mack encounters these figures, he realizes that the shack has changed from its abandoned and dilapidated state to a cleaner and more beautiful home. This spatial transformation shows Mack's inner transformation as he is growing after the trauma.



Figure 4. The shack to which God calls Mack

God told Mack that he had missed him for a long time and had called him to heal the growing emotional wound between them. Mack confronted God and expressed his pain. “You’re the almighty God, right? You know everything. You’re everywhere, all at once. You have a limitless power. Yet, somehow, you let my little girl die when she needed you most.” Mack questioned why God allowed his daughter to die and expressed his anger at God for turning his back on those he loved. This questioning reveals the chaos inside Mack and the damage to his faith in God. God, on the other hand, repeatedly told Mack that He loved him, that He never left his daughter and that He always saw his pain. God explained to Mack that the pain blinded him, so he could not see God's love. Avoiding pain, which is one of the important components of life, also has a meaning, and avoiding pain is also considered as avoiding life (Frankl, 2013). With the example of the bird in the garden, he explained that living without being loved is like breaking a bird's wing and that pain achieves this. At this point, Mack is symbolized as a bird next to the shack; the pain prevented him from flying and wounded him spiritually. The shack becomes a place of healing to heal this wound and make Mack “fly” again. Mack's interaction with God initiated a process of rebuilding his lost values of love, compassion, forgiveness and justice. God figures guided Mack in his inner healing. Mack's faith in and love for God was damaged, especially due to the trauma caused by the loss of his daughter. This spiritual guidance helped him heal his emotional wounds and rebuild his faith. The ever-changing forms of God figures, such as an African woman and a middle-aged man, emphasize that God can exist anywhere and in anything. As a matter of fact, Mack's perception of a punitive God and the idea that God is not good has changed with the different God figures shown in the movie.

Symbolism of Journey, Waterfall and Water

Water becomes a recurring theme in the film as a symbol of Mack's inner journey and spiritual purification process. Especially the scene where he is alone on the boat reflects the moments when Mack is alone with his traumas and pain. This scene is presented as a visual representation of the dark thoughts in Mack's mind and his self-destructive tendencies. The initially clear sea water becomes murky as Mack's dark thoughts intensify. However, at this moment, a figure of God reminds Mack to let go of his thoughts, to focus on himself and everything will be alright. As Mack focuses on God and accepts his guidance, his negative thoughts are shown to clear as the sea becomes clearer. In the following minutes of the film, when Mack is completely free from his thoughts, it is symbolized through the scene of him running on the sea that he is now in control of his thoughts and that he has taken a step towards healing.



Figure 5. Negative thoughts sinking the boat

A scene in which Mack confronts Wisdom in a cave is the culmination of his profound questioning of God. In that scene, Mack questions God's justice, asking him to judge and punish the murderer who killed both his father and his daughter. However, Wisdom tells Mack that he must take God's place and send one of his two children to hell. Faced with this difficult choice, Mack decided to sacrifice himself and thus realized how difficult it is to judge God. This scene symbolizes Mack's deep questioning of the concepts of justice and mercy and his eventual conviction that God is neither evil nor guilty. After reaching this realization, the waterfall metaphor comes into play and a window opens through which Mack can see his daughter. The scene where he passes under the waterfall reinforces the use of water as a symbol of forgiveness and spiritual cleansing.



Figure 6. Soaking/purification under a waterfall

The waterfall, used as an important metaphor in the film, represents a story that is associated with Mack's daughter. According to the story Mack tells his daughter, the princess, the daughter of a tribal chief, learns that the only way to get rid of the diseases in her land is to sacrifice her own life, and in order to make this sacrifice, she jumps from the waterfall and sacrifices herself for her people. In this context, the waterfall represents both the princess's sacrifice and a symbol identified with Mack's missing daughter. The tears of a father whose daughter is missing are also deeply associated with this metaphor. The waterfall is a powerful image that symbolizes Mack's emotional loss and inner pain as well as his purging of this pain.



Figure 7. The waterfall described during the trip to the camp

In conclusion, water stands out as a central metaphor for Mack's inner journey and process of overcoming his traumas. While representing both the process of purification and forgiveness, water plays an important role in Mack's confrontation with God and finding his own inner peace. In a sense, water serves as a means of overcoming Mack's traumatic experiences, a means of spiritual cleansing and transformation.

The Garden Figure and Forgiveness

Mack's healing process is symbolically visualized in the film and embodied through the metaphor of the garden. The garden represents Mack's complex inner and mental world, where both untidy and uncultivated elements reflect his post-traumatic mental state. The clearing of the bad, the weeds in the garden with God symbolizes Mack's process of healing his inner turmoil and pain through confronting it with the help of God. This action depicts Mack's effort to clear the chaos in his mind and the traumatic scars of the past.



Figure 8. Mack's weeding of the garden

The constant change of colors and natural elements in the film is directly related to the transformation in Mack's inner world. The dark and cold atmosphere Mack is in symbolizes his deep pain, disbelief and anger towards God. However, as the film plays out, nature comes to life, the colors become brighter and the atmosphere becomes warmer, which is a manifestation of Mack's process of reconciliation with himself and God, learning to forgive and believe again. The process of forgiveness is an important turning point as part of Mack's journey to forgive and heal himself and his family. Mack's process of forgiving his daughter's murderer is an important turning point in the film, where the character experiences a deep spiritual transformation and overcomes his trauma. The representation of God in different forms, especially as a middle-aged man who takes the place of Mack's father, symbolizes Mack's confrontation with both his personal past and his emotional distance from God. The scene of forgiving his daughter's murderer embodies Mack's process of confronting trauma and coming to terms with it. The fact that Mack takes the killer in the guise of an insect and releases him by saying "I forgive you" shows that his anger and desire for revenge has been replaced by forgiveness.



Figure 9. Mack not killing the insect

Forgiveness is nourished by religion and values and plays an important role in personal development, spiritual well-being, the elimination of biases, the relief of feelings of hopelessness and pessimism, and the resolution of conflicts in society (Özan & Aybala, 2024). This scene underlines that forgiveness is not only forgiving another person, but also a part of the process of healing oneself. When Mack reaches his daughter's body, he buries her in the prepared garden with the God figures. Their actions during the process of burying his daughter symbolically means burying Mack's traumatic loss in the ground and making a new beginning. The revival of nature as a result of the Holy Spirit pouring Mack's tears into the grave symbolizes Mack's spiritual purification and healing of the trauma. This scene also represents Mack's spiritual transformation along with the reawakening of nature.



Figure 10. His daughter's grave

The arrangement of the garden shows that Mack's inner turmoil and emotional disarray is over and that he has found peace and balance. While the garden in the film is a symbol of disorder and pain in Mack's mind, the

arrangement and revival of this garden with the God figures indicates that Mack has found his inner order and overcome post-traumatic destruction.



Figure 11. Mack's organized garden in which he buried his daughter

The restoration of the notions of forgiveness and justice are central to Mack's post-traumatic healing process. Throughout the movie, Mack learns to forgive not only his daughter's killer, but also his own father and himself. This process also radically changed Mack's understanding of justice. In the film, God teaches Mack that justice is not limited to punishment, but is also linked to forgiveness, mercy and love.

Restoring Family Relationships

In the film, Mack's eventual reconnection to his family, friends and community emphasizes a more positive growth and development of the character. This growth and development after trauma can be characterized by a change in one's view of oneself (Tedeschi & Calhoun 1996). The process of repairing his relationship with his daughter Kate, in particular, symbolizes Mack's effort to reconstruct the broken family ties and love that had been disrupted by the trauma. Mack, who re-established his relationship with his family, also came out of the process of loneliness and isolation that he had exposed himself to due to the trauma. He started to reintegrate into society by participating in religious ceremonies and social activities. As a result of trauma, some people can make positive progress such as finding the meaning of life and personal empowerment (Shakespeare-Finch et al. 2003). Mack found the meaning of the values he questioned, such as justice, forgiveness and faith, and became personally empowered. By the end of the movie, he has strengthened his family ties and developed a deeper and more sincere faith in God. The story ends by showing him finding happiness again in the same place called "The Day of Great Sadness".

Conclusion

The movie *The Shack* deals with post-traumatic destruction and the process of post-traumatic growth. Mack's spiritual transformation after the trauma was effective in regaining values such as forgiveness, justice, love and strengthening family ties. This process, in addition to the many negative aspects of the trauma, helped him overcome these destructive impacts and become stronger. In the movie, many symbols such as the shack, water, the waterfall, the garden, different God figures show in detail the protagonist's trauma and post-traumatic growth process, the spiritual change, the restoration of the values of forgiveness, justice and love. Especially God figures, which are one of the main themes of the movie, are important indicators of post-traumatic spiritual transformation and serve as a guide in the post-traumatic process of the protagonist. For Mack, who questions values such as justice and forgiveness, God figures teach these values by reconsidering them. After the traumatic experience, changes in the character's self-perception, changes in his relationships with others, his philosophy of life and spiritual changes are presented through signs in the movie. The symbolic representation of nature coincides with Mack's inner world and transformation. Elements such as Mack's journey serve as sign systems that support the main themes of the movie and enable the audience to make in-depth meanings. Water symbolism expresses thoughts and emotions, purification. Therefore, the impact of trauma on the individual and his/her subsequent change is shown through colors, locations and dialogues. The plot shows that values such as forgiveness, justice, faith and love can be weakened or even damaged in times of crisis, but with the right guidance and social support, these values can be rebuilt. The film particularly focuses on post-traumatic growth and spiritual change, emphasizing that the destructive effects of trauma on the individual can be overcome and that it is possible to rebuild values. It also emphasizes the importance of confronting traumatic events and the role of forgiveness in the process of overcoming the impact of trauma.

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