

Analysis of Trauma Response and Resilience of Select Characters in *Forrest Gump*  
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Name: Devraj.P.H

Register Number: 210021000951

Research Centre and Postgraduate Department of English

Bharata Mata College, Thrikkakara

Kochi – 682021

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## Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Analysis of Trauma Response and Resilience of Select Characters in *Forrest Gump*** is a bona fide record of sincere work done by, Devraj.P.H, Register Number: 210021000951, Bharata Mata College, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature under the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam during the year 2023-2024.

Project Guides,

Ms. Haritha Rajan

Guest Faculty

Research Centre and

Postgraduate Department of English

Bharata Mata College, Thrikkakara

Dr. Thara Gangadharan

Head of the Department

Research Centre and

Postgraduate Department of English

Bharata Mata College, Thrikkakara

## Declaration

I, hereby declare that the presented entitled **Analysis of Trauma Response and Resilience of Select Characters in *Forrest Gump*** is based on the research that I did on under the supervision and guidance of Ms. Haritha Rajan, Guest Faculty, Research Centre and Postgraduate Department of English, Bharata Mata College, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. This is a report of my hands based on the research done on the selected topic and it is my original work and interpretations drawn therein are based on material collected by myself. It has not been previously formed basis for the award of any degree, diploma or fellowship or other similar title or recognition.

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Devraj.P.H

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Reg.No: 210021000951

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This project follows MLA 8<sup>th</sup> edition



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Trauma is derived from the Greek word trauma, which implies wound or injury. It was specifically used to refer to physical wounds inflicted on the body in ancient Greek. The term's definition grew throughout time to encompass emotional or psychological harm as well. The psychological and emotional effects of traumatic events on people's mental health and well-being are examined by trauma theory. The term Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is coined by famous trauma researcher Judith Herman, it is a psychological disorder brought on by prolonged or recurrent exposure to traumatic events, especially interpersonal trauma such as maltreatment as a child, domestic violence, or captivity. It is characterized by a variety of symptoms that go beyond those of classic PTSD, such as disruptions in self-perception, emotional control, social interactions, and cognitive abilities. The film used in the research is *Forrest Gump*, one of the most popular movies of all time. Because of the time period in the movie which includes Vietnam war, cultural movements and the trauma faced by the characters Forrest and Jenny trauma theory is of utmost importance or very relevant in *Forrest Gump*.

Research will be focusing on these two characters, namely Forrest and Jenny. In this research Forrest's and Jenny's trauma and their responses are explained based on Judith Herman's trauma theory which focuses on Complex PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) that is outlined in her work *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*.

For survivors of prolonged, repeated trauma, it is not practical to approach each memory as a separate entity. There are simply too many incidents, and often similar memories have blurred together. Usually, however, a few distinct and particularly meaningful incidents stand out. Reconstruction of the trauma narrative is often based heavily upon these paradigmatic incidents, with the understanding that one episode stands for many (Herman, chapter 3). The quote gives the fact that survivors find it hard to remember each memory as a distinct event because of a large number of tragic events and because similar memories blend together, just like the way that Forrest finds it difficult to remember some memories.

Trauma can make people more vulnerable to certain incidents related to the trauma that they faced. People tend to notice only the external wounds they neglect the internal wounds which can sometimes prove more fatal. "Trauma is not what happens to you, it's what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you. Trauma is that scarring that makes you less flexible, more rigid, less feeling and more defended" (Mate 12). This quote by Gabor Mate can be applied to Jenny's character where in which she becomes vulnerable due to trauma.

Traumatized people mostly like to keep to themselves. People who have experienced trauma frequently find it difficult to open up to others for fear of being misinterpreted or judged, yet sharing their stories and asking for help can help them start the healing process and move on. "Trauma is personal. It does not disappear if it is not validated. When it is ignored or invalidated the silent screams continue internally heard only by the one held captive. When someone enters the pain and hears the screams, healing can begin" (Bernock). Healing can begin only through seeking help.



In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the psychological field particularly psychiatry and psychology developed the idea of trauma to characterize the long-lasting impacts of extremely upsetting or distressing events on a person's mental and emotional health. These days, word "trauma" refers to a wide range of events that have a profound and long-lasting effect on a person's life, including both physical and psychological traumas.

*Forrest Gump* is a 1994 American comedy-drama film directed by Robert Zemeckis and written by Eric Roth. Main casts include Tom Hanks, Robin Wright, Gary Sinise, Mykelti Williamson, and Sally Field. Winston Groom's novel from 1986 served as the basis for the movie. Forrest Gump is the main character in both. The film, however, mostly concentrates on the novel's first eleven chapters before jumping ahead to the part where Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. is founded and Forrest Jr. is met. In addition to omitting certain passages from the book, the movie expands on Gump's life by including events like his childhood leg braces and his cross-country run.

*Forrest Gump* expertly combines fiction and history to depict the story of a simple man who achieves remarkable things in his life. The setting of the movie is important American historical events. Through the incredible journey of the protagonist film explores the themes of love, fate, and the unshakeable human spirit. *Forrest Gump* with its' superb writing, exciting scenes and praise worthy acting, still has great emotional attachment to the general audience.

"*Forrest Gump* is a rare and miraculous feat of filmmaking. It's a beautifully crafted story with heart, humour, and an unforgettable message about the beauty of life's unexpected

moments.” (Ebert). The movie reaches a degree of magnificence rarely attained in cinema through the creation of mosaic of human experience that appeals to audiences of all ages.

The way that trauma is portrayed by Robert Zemeckis in *Forrest Gump* is complex, minute and profoundly moving. Forrest Gump and Jenny undergo a lot, and Zemeckis uses these events to show the lasting effects of trauma on both individuals. Zemeckis provides an insightful examination of fortitude, healing, and the resiliency of the human spirit in the face of misfortune via the life of Forrest Gump. But in the case of the character Jenny, Zemeckis portrays how trauma negatively affected her.

One of the important reasons for the success of *Forrest Gump* is because of the excellent portrayal of the titular character by Tom Hanks. Each character brings essence to the movie, other unforgettable acting are lieutenant Dan by Gary Sinise and Jenny who is Forrest's love interest by Robin Wright. These character's interaction with Forrest influences his journey of life.

The movie *Forrest Gump* explores the extraordinary journey of its central character Forrest Gump. This movie tells its' story through various periods of American history. The main themes include love, sorrow and victory. Forrest has been through many tragedies and trauma from a young age, even though his mind lacks the intellectual threshold he fortified his life journey through positive outlook to everything around him. The constant bullying from his peers from when he was a child, death of his mother and fighting for his country in Vietnam, these all were obstacles that Forrest fought head on with his unshakable mentality. Just like Forrest Jenny Curran was a central character in this story who led a very sad life, she has also been exposed to trauma, her abusive Father made her to leave home to lead an

addictive and self-destroying life. Despite their difficulties, Forrest's unwavering love for Jenny gives them both a sense of security and comfort. Their broken relationship is because of the impact of trauma in their lives. At the end of the movie Jenny dies leaving Forrest alone with their son, though heartbroken he finds solace in raising little Forrest. This has always been the life of Forrest even though he faces many hardships he overcomes them with his positive outlook.

First chapter gives an introduction to the trauma theory and to the movie *Forrest Gump*. The second chapter deeply analyses the theory that is implied in the research. The third chapter explains the cumulative traumatic incidents faced by Forrest Gump based on the Judith Herman's theory of complex PTSD and how he with his positive outlook changed his fate. The fourth chapter looks into Jenny's character in the same way as that of Forrest's, it also talks about the self-destructive way that she lived due to the trauma she faced. In the last and conclusive chapter research will give an analysis of how different approaches to trauma can lead to different outcomes.

## Chapter 2

### Trauma theory

Trauma is an upsetting or stressful event that can have long time effects in a individual's psychology and emotions. Many events and circumstances like physical and mental abuse, violence, natural catastrophes, accidents and even witnessing these events can cause it. Trauma can make a person feel vulnerable, helpless and afraid losing their sense of safety and security. This might lead to symptoms like anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, depression and trouble in trusting people. "Just as the body goes into shock after a physical trauma, so does the human psyche go into shock after the impact of a major loss" (Grant).

Trauma theory is a field of study that primarily focuses on the psychological and physical after effects of going through a traumatic experience or consequence of certain events. Trauma theory helps to understand how certain experiences of an individual might influence their identity, as well as interpersonal relations, along with a general perspective on life. It plays a vital role in providing support services to those who are tremendously impacted by the trauma. The widespread occurrence of shell shock among soldiers during the first world war, in turn highlighted the psychological impacts of war stress in the psyche of these soldiers. Soldiers were exposed to the horrors of the battle reported aftereffects such as flashbacks, nightmares, and emotional numbness, sparking renewed emphasis on trauma study and therapy. Trauma theory initially emerged in the 1990s as a method to decipher the psychological effects of traumatic incidents on human psyche. It is rooted on Freudian theory to create a trauma model that makes use of particular severe event that pushes the boundaries of language and could even completely breaks meaning. According to this trauma model,

suffering is not something that should be emoted. This further paved a new way for additional research on the psychological impacts and aftereffects of trauma. Sigmund Freud believed that trauma could lead one to repression, that is the unconscious blocking of traumatic memories. Pierre Janet's work on hysteria and dissociation further advanced and provided new realms in our understanding of trauma. Freud, Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Bonnie Burstow and Bessel van der are other important pioneers in the field of trauma studies. The most conventional trauma model, put forward by Cathy Caruth, sets trauma as an experience that could fracture the consciousness and could restrict direct verbal expression. This theory model emphasizes the degree of suffering by putting forward the concept that the traumatic experience irreversibly alters the psyche of an individual.

Intersectionality of trauma is a theory that is being discussed in recent times in trauma study. It is a study in which different human characteristics are to be considered and is believed are crossing paths with one another forming the trauma experiences in people. The different characteristics being social background, race and gender. This approach deserves appreciation as it breaks down obstacles marginalizing trauma ridden individuals based on their communities and not letting this affect in the study and research of trauma as a whole. Cultural trauma theory is another field which deals with the effects of trauma in a community or group or a society as a whole, historical disasters are examples. This theory explains how a collective of people in a society experiences trauma and how it shapes their memory, cultural narratives and identity, and how these traumatic experiences define them and their future generations. Trauma manifestation on bodies is another field of study that is not to be taken lightly. This is a sort of embodiment of trauma, in which the trauma experienced appear as

physical issues in individuals which in fact addresses the connection between the mind and the body during the slow healing or withdrawal from trauma.

Trauma specialist and researcher Judith Lewis Herman is popular for her research works on healing and trauma. One of her most famous work *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* talks about effects of trauma in the mind and healing and recovery process. Most of our knowledge about the concepts like complex trauma, dissociation, and the effects of social and cultural elements on traumatic experiences has been formed by her works, these kinds of works also makes a good contribution to the area of trauma study. She is also a supporter of trauma survivors and has been important in bringing attention to their needs. Herman found the need for a new classification of (CPTSD) Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to identify effects of repeated trauma.

Judith Herman was the one who came up with the concept of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD). This is a form of continuous trauma that arises from practices such as childhood maltreatment, domestic violence, extended captivity, etc. that ultimately destroys one's mental strength. Even though PTSD was officially acknowledged in the DSM-III in 1980, survivors of repeated trauma were not sufficiently classified because the diagnostic criteria of that time focused mostly on single traumatic events. Even though Herman succeeded in popularizing the idea of Complex PTSD by pointing out its unique signs and symptoms through her book *Trauma and Recovery* it still did not get the recognition it deserved. The major breakthrough came when CPTSD was finally added to the 2013 edition of DSM-5 which openly discussed its severity and it was something which was to be studied and accepted as a unique clinical entity. While not considered a separate

diagnosis, Complex PTSD is listed as Other Specified Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders in Section III of the DSM-5, a diagnosis that is contingent upon additional study.

Complex trauma results due to multiple to long Traumatic experiences like emotional, physical and sexual abuse. It can have cumulative impact and later this leads to Complex PTSD. Complex PTSD has important clinical and societal consequences since it is a separate and severe kind of trauma-related disorder caused by persistent, interpersonal stress. By recognizing the experiences of those who have survived protracted abuse, neglect, or imprisonment, the notion of C-PTSD encourages more complete assessment, diagnosis, and intervention options, eventually supporting healing, recovery, and resilience in trauma survivors.

Complex PTSD can significantly affect the day-to-day life, social interactions and overall, the general aspect of leading a proper life. Any symptoms that were mentioned earlier and negative feedback of themselves can greatly put a halt to the daily activities of social nourishment, their duties, keeping a steady state of mind in the workspace and so on. Not only with society, but individuals who survived after they had been diagnosed with C-PTSD can also face challenges in maintaining a healthy relationship with their loved ones. Their communication, intimacy and trust are disrupted because of this. This eventually may lead to keeping to themselves and isolation. Everyday stress and hyper alertness felt by the individuals suffering from C-PTSD can amount to various health issues such as exhausted mind and body, severe chronic pain and autoimmune diseases. Some of these are very physically painful. If not discovered before it's too late, a person's chance at a sound life could be in ruins.

Trauma and memory are very closely associated. Trauma causes disruptions in memory, just like the case with Forrest. Forrest who is seen narrating his life experiences to people has trouble in remembering some incidents. He likes to speak about the good times only, whenever the talk goes to a matter of traumatic event in his life, he would say that he does not remember it. This is because of the disruptions that trauma made in his memory bank. For example, Forrest presents his memories of his time in Vietnam as jumbled and fractured, with some incidents dominating his memories more than others. Forrest Gump also has linguistic disability, which is evident in his plain and uncomplicated speech patterns. He has trouble understanding complicated linguistic patterns and metaphors since he tends to take words very literally. His overall portrayal as an intellectually limited individual includes this linguistic impediment.

Herman also identifies a recovery process for survivors of trauma. According to Herman recovery occurs in three stages. First stage is Safety and Stabilization, establishing the survivor's physical and emotional safety and stability is the goal of this stage. It could entail looking for dependable connections, establishing consistency and routine, and attending to any immediate safety issues. Second stage is Remembrance and Mourning, during this phase, survivors are frequently helped by counselling or support groups to face and work through their painful memories. This could entail lamenting losses, making sense of the past, and identifying and expressing feelings associated with the trauma. Reconnection and integration: Rebuilding a feeling of purpose and connection in the survivor's life is the main goal of the last stage. This could entail making new connections with people, rediscovering one's sense of agency and autonomy, and finding meaning and purpose in one's career or creative endeavours.



We can see Forrest and Jenny undergoing these stages of recovery in their life. Forrest takes comfort in routine and discipline, such as his daily runs and commitment to his shrimp company. Jenny, on the other hand, seeks protection by moving away from her tragic history. Through introspection and acceptance, Forrest gradually comes to terms with the death of his loved ones, particularly Jenny and his mother. Jenny, on the other hand, confronts her horrific history and starts to work through her hurt via her friendship with Forrest and her ultimate return to Greenbow. Finally, as they reconstruct their lives, both characters undergo reconnection and integration. Herman's theory of trauma underlines survivors' resiliency in their quest for healing and rehabilitation and stresses the significance of comprehending trauma within its larger social and cultural context.

In *Forrest Gump* Forrest and Jenny suffer a series of traumatic events which can be explained on the basis of complex PTSD. While Forrest demonstrates resilience and coping mechanisms throughout the film, he still had emotional wounds due to his past tragedies. There is also a trace of cultural and historical trauma in the movie which affects the characters.

## Chapter 3

### Trauma, response and resilience of Forrest Gump

Forrest Gump's early years are filled with challenges arising from his physical disabilities. Due to his low IQ and braces in his legs that has to be worn because of his spinal condition makes him an easy target for bullies. Because of his unresponsive nature the bullies would find tormenting Forrest on a daily basis their fun playtime routine. Knowing that he was different from his classmates and children around his age wasn't easy for him as the idea of being kept at a distance and getting belittled due to this same fact would leave a lasting impact on Forrest. This would eventually lead to understanding himself and his perception of the world around him. These early traumatic experiences set the stage for Forrest's development of complex PTSD. Forrest's disability makes him feel even more inadequate, unworthy, and alienated, from his bullying experiences as a child to his difficulties as an adult trying to fit in and find acceptance.

The bullying Forrest had to endure in his childhood were more than a handful. As per the Social Learning Theory, bullying events from childhood are one of the sources of Forrest Gump's trauma. In this notion, negative views are internalized as a result of bullying that occurs repeatedly. He received so much bullying that it heavily contributed to his low self-esteem and feelings of insecurity. These feelings would not magically disappear on its own after they run its course but rather, they would give him a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt even going into his adulthood. As a little silver lining these feelings would also make him gather inside of him a little resilience and determination. Even with the constant bullying and unfriendly pranks of his peers he would not let others tell him that he can't do something just

because he is differently abled. His disabilities would not define him in anyway. He accepts his differences and embraces them with open arms. He sets his sail into the world a disabled man on his own terms.

According to the Attachment Theory disruptions in early attachment relationships might have a lasting impact on a person's sense of security and emotional development. Forrest's father passes when Forrest is just a young boy. However, he was not alone there. His mother who did nothing but love her son more than anything in the world was his lifeline and constant companion throughout his life. The effects and Impact of losing his father would not leave him soon as it was something little Forrest could not understand. The absence of his father lead to constant abandonment thoughts in his mind which he struggled with for a whole lot. Nothing would fill the hole that keeps on getting bigger everyday as it was too much for him to fathom.

One of the important factors of Forrest's life is his connection with Jenny, which has both passionate love and pain. The foundation of the friendship with started at childhood and continued into adulthood was their shared experiences of trauma and agony. Forrest's love towards Jenny gave her comfort which acted as a light in her dark life, which was filled with abuse and trauma. Forrest is greatly moved by Jenny's trauma. His heart breaks when he sees her sufferings and pain. Not being able to protect her give rise to feelings of worthlessness in him. Forrest still tries his best to protect her from the injustices of the world. Despite all of life's cruelty his unconditional and unwavering love gives them both a sense of security and hope.

According to Jenny Edkins when someone betrays a person that person can get trauma because there was a breaking of trust and belief. “In some case the situation is called to be traumatic when it produces the symptoms of trauma- an event has to be more than just a situation of utter powerlessness. In an important sense, it has to entail something else. It has to involve a betrayal of trust as well. There is an extreme menace, but what is special is where the threat of violence comes from. What we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormenters: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turned against us” (4). In the movie Jenny comes to Forrest's house to stay with him making Forrest who loves her very happy. They spent many days together just like old times and they even slept together. They had sex just after Forrest asks her “but won't you marry me” (Zemeckis, 1:49). This might have raised hope in him that Jenny will be his forever. But yet again she leaves him without even saying a goodbye, here again he starts running to suppress his trauma.

During Forrest's time, in the Vietnam War it was a period that left a lasting impact on his life. He faced experiences and extreme challenges as a soldier in the midst of battle surrounded by death and destruction. Witnessing the realities of war firsthand Forrest grappled with turmoil and profound brutality that reshaped his outlook on life. The intensity of the battlefield tested his identity. Altered his perception of reality in ways that stayed with him long after the physical wounds had healed. Dealing with survivors' guilt and haunted by memories of fallen comrades Forrest carried a burden that manifested as a mix of emotions ranging from sorrow, to anger to uncertainty—a reflection of the complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder he endured. Despite the chaos Forrest found moments of courage and

resilience by drawing strength from the bonds he made with his soldiers and the valuable lessons learned during the combat. Emerging from the war the visible and invisible wounds on him forever changed Forrest. His experiences, in Vietnam greatly influenced his perspective, on the importance of friendship the value of sacrifice and the fragility of life.

By travelling in to the darkness of battle he finds new meaning and appreciation for life. Forrest is badly affected by the death of his comrade Bubba and the hardships of Lieutenant Dan, his commanding officer, which increases his Vietnam War trauma. The cruelty and worthlessness of war is portrayed by the death of Bubba, a who had great ambitions in his life. The passing of his friend adds to the emotional suffering of forest. The thought that was killing Forrest was the thought of a not being able to save his friend. It gave rise to a fire in him to honour his friend even after his death.

Lieutenant Dan's psychological and physical scars act as a continual reminder of the price paid by soldiers who defend their nation. Forrest's personal search for healing and redemption is similar to Lieutenant Dan's path from bitter and broken to finding harmony and meaning. Forrest learns more about friendship, loyalty, and the enduring relationships created in war via their shared experiences. Forrest Gump is not your average guy that would submit to the challenges that he faces.

"You have to do the best with what God gave you" (Zemeckis 1:40). Forrest was living through fire most of his life, but he tried his best to make everything and also the people around him better. "You got to put the past behind you before you can move on" (Zemeckis 1:57). With her words Forrest's mother taught his how overcome his bad experiences. "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get"

(Zemeckis 3:45). This dialogue captures his acceptance of the unpredictable nature of life in spite of his struggles. It alludes to his capacity to find hope and purpose in the face of hardship.

As we can see Forrest goes through a series of traumatic experiences as is the case with complex trauma. Eventually it led to Complex PTSD, he develops symptoms such as low self-esteem and feeling disconnected from oneself or others. His cumulative trauma led to the rise of these kinds of sensations in him. In a scene when he sees little Forrest for the first time, he asks Jenny “is he smart, or” (Zemeckis, 2:03). This shows his feeling of low self-esteem. Many people called him “stupid”. He has heard this many times then he can count this might have developed a thought in him that he is stupid. We can see that many people and many circumstances too have been very cruel to him which gave him many bad moments in his life.

Through the prism of narrative theory, Forrest's narration throughout the film can be understood. His propensity to share his life story with total strangers is a reflection of his need to make sense of what happened to him and craft a convincing narrative. Forrest uses storytelling as a coping strategy that helps him make sense of his experiences and process his trauma. It also helps to reduce his burden by putting it of his chest.

Resilience theory suggests that individuals have the capacity to adapt and bounce back from painful memories. Forrest's perseverance in the face of suffering is a prime example of this notion. Most of his life Forrest battles with the loss of his loved ones, in childhood he lost his father and as an adult he lost his mother. The loss of his mother was something he did not foreseen as he thought his mother would forever be with him, his

mother who was the constant guidelight for him in all his ventures and the voice which would never leave him in a moment of confusion. The sadness Forrest felt after losing his childhood sweetheart Jenny destroyed him completely. The amount of pain and sorrow he felt as a whole or the unique depression he felt after losing his loved ones individually one by one was not fair to Forrest. He had gone through cruel situations a human being could take up on in a lifetime. Even though bad things keep happening to him he still had it in him to find a way to cope. He would run a whole lot to take his mind off of things, in running he would find therapy, the wind against his body, the open road that offered endless freedom that may seem never ending and each of his footsteps that sings unique rhythms whenever it comes in contact with the asphalt, all these were a way to escape from the depressing reality he was destined with. Forrest refused to let go his loved ones even after their time with him, their memories would always prove a source of undying strength and inspiration.

Endless sorrow and grief have major effects on Forrest. One would expect Forrest to have no willpower to keep on pedalling after all that he's been through, but these circumstances led Forrest to understand human life and the sadness and happiness associated with it. He comes to know that life is a fleeting phenomenon and it is important to live it to the fullest. How important it is to cherish your loved ones and to feel grateful for the life you've been blessed around them. Even when faced with immense heartbreak he finds it in himself to discover his capacity for love and care to his surroundings. By navigating through both the low and high tides of life we could see his immeasurable resilience to keep fighting on. Forrest is a beacon of hope for anyone who thinks that the world is an unforgiving place filled with darkness and despair.

Forrest Gump is an ideal person who does not give up to adversity. Against every misfortune he had his head held up. His soul never gave in to the tempting and inevitable feeling of defeat one would feel if things didn't go their way. He just wouldn't let a failure define him. Optimistic outlook towards anything good or bad helped him many times, he learned to smile and see good in every situation he was dealt with. Not only when faced with hardships would Forrest shows his innate positive qualities, in-fact he is a person of gentle nature, his unconditional love without a slight of expectation of the same, his forgiving nature and most importantly he would never question himself for believing in his values.



## Chapter 4

### Complex PTSD of Jenny Curran

Jenny is the heroine in the movie *Forrest Gump* and the second most important character. As a result of growing in a broken household Jenny had experiences of physical and sexual abuse by her father. Her own father who was supposed to protect her abuses her, this results in her mistrust to others also. These early tragedies have great emotional scars on her which shape the hair personality and other feelings. Jenny as a child feels that she is defenceless and cannot fight against her father and the violence and chaos at her home. This childhood trauma establishes the ground work for the development of Complex PTSD in her.

Jenny's mother died when she was five. As there was no mother to protect her from her abusive and alcoholic father, she began to build a thought that she was alone in this world. Even though she found a companion in Forrest, he was also a child unable to help her. There is a scene in the movie in which little Jenny's dress is shown torn, Jenny is afraid that her father would wake up from his sleep. Jenny would run off and hide in the field and pray "Dear God, make me a bird, so I can fly far, far, far away from here" (Zemeckis, 19:4). This scene depicts in depth the fear and trauma Jenny had to suffer from a very little age. At childhood itself Jenny develops the habit of running away from her problems. Some nights, Jenny would sneak out and go to Forrest's house because she was scared. As a young child, she was unable to withstand or properly defend herself, thus she believed that escaping was her only option. "Characters who experience great trauma will sometimes create an escape"

(Geoffrey S. Fletcher) just like Jenny who engage in something else to forget that she is traumatized.

Jenny's trauma shows up in different ways as she gets older, which adds to her emotional instability and bad coping techniques. Jenny's desire to become a singer and achieve success and popularity is another way for her to forget about her past traumas. She hoped to find the pure and real affection that she sought throughout her life. She sought love and affection because the only thing that she received or she remembers is the abuse that she had to suffer. This wanting of love is the reason that she engages in relationship with other men. Viewing the world as a cruel place she searched for unmoral ways to make money. Jenny's experiences can be understood through the objectification theory, as she is exploited by men. They only see her as an object of pleasure and nothing else. She was ready to expose her body because she felt that she was already violated in her childhood. This led to Jenny being kicked out from college and many other men using her for their pleasure. Since things didn't go as she wanted, she adopted a carefree life style. Jenny would just go anywhere with people that she didn't even know. She became a hippie and lived a purposeless life because she thought that in this way she wouldn't get hurt by her own expectations. Jenny also indulged in taking drugs, she says that she is trying to learn "how to live in harmony" (Zemeckis, 1:10) but this was another way for her to escape from the reality.

She struggles with intimacy and vulnerability and has mistrust towards people as a result of her traumatic experiences, which have shaped her worldview. She thinks that it is not worth to try lead a good life because her life is already ruined and due to the reason that she cannot forget her past miseries. Heavy taking drugs increases her feelings of emptiness, anxiety, depression and flashbacks. Intersectional trauma can also be applied in Jenny's case,

her experiences of trauma are influenced by intersecting factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and childhood abuse. For being a woman too she had some trauma, she was a lonely woman living in a patriarchal society that too in the sixties. She faces many problems like lack of opportunities, oppression and exploitation by men. Her perspectives of power, control, and self-worth are impacted by her trauma and her experiences growing up as a woman in a patriarchal environment.

In order to gain their freedom, survivors may have to give up almost everything else. Battered women may lose their homes, their friends, and their livelihood. Survivors of childhood abuse may lose their families. Political refugees may lose their homes and their homeland. Rarely are the dimensions of this sacrifice fully recognized (Herman, 68). The passage highlights that the sacrifices are significant and frequently go unnoticed by others who may not completely understand the scope of what survivors like Jenny have gone through. She also becomes involved in the counterculture movement of the 1960s she hopes to find purpose and meaning by living in a rebellious and non-conventional way. By the end Jenny is trying to live a normal life for the sake of her son and finally as a relief for all the pain she suffered, she dies due to a disease.

Jenny Curran developed complex post-traumatic stress disorder due to her traumatic experiences in childhood. Herman mentions that “dissociation lies at the heart of the traumatic stress disorders. Studies of survivors of disasters, terrorist attacks, and combat have demonstrated that people who enter a dissociative state at the time of the traumatic event are among most likely to develop long-lasting PTSD” (42). Jenny used to withdraw herself from other people. She didn’t trust anyone, she also rejected Forrest’s help whenever he tried to

help her. Jenny feels that she is not worthy to be with Forrest, she feels that she might hurt him too. She considers herself a bad and ruined person.

These shame and guilt-related emotions exacerbate Jenny's complex PTSD symptoms by making her feel more alone and alienated. She has a tendency to end her life, in the movie there are two scenes in which Jenny shows this tendency. Jenny asks Forrest while standing in a bridge "You think I could fly off this bridge?" (Zemeckis, 38:49). In the second scene Jenny was using heavy drugs and then she looked at the mirror she had become a person absolutely opposite of what she wanted to be. Disgraced of herself she tries to jump off from the balcony, but suddenly she regains her consciousness and steps down from the balcony. She wants to free herself from the pain that keeps haunting her persistently.

The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma (36). This quote by Herman explains how the brain stores traumatic memories in a special and disruptive way that causes them to suddenly and intrusively surface into consciousness. Flashbacks to past traumas, severe emotional anguish, avoiding triggering circumstances or memories, trouble sustaining relationships, and feelings of numbness or detachment are some of the symptoms that Jenny shows in relation to Complex PTSD. Due to the intense and

protracted nature of her traumatic experiences, she also has trouble controlling her emotions and have a distorted view of herself.

The life of Jenny Curran in the movie, *Forrest Gump* is portrayed as a turbulent one, constantly characterized by a string of relationships and self-destructive deeds that is stemmed from her traumatic and troubled background. Jenny seems to lack purpose and fulfilment in her life despite her brilliance, knowledge, and attractiveness. She constantly tends to take risky decisions. Jenny's frequent tendency to enter into toxic relationships that tends to disrupt her peace is one of the most foremost as well as highly noticeable features of her self-destructive behaviour. She has a long history of unstable and dysfunctional relationships, ranging from her turbulent upbringing with an abusive father, who constantly traumatized her to her chaotic romantic relationships with Forrest and various other men. Rather than searching for positive relationships that could help her with healing, she is drawn to those who constantly encourages and urges her to continue her traumatizing patterns and instead of filling her with positivity, feeds her with bad self-image. Ecological systems theory, stressing emphasis on the impact of diverse environmental elements in the development of people, could be used to critically analyse the journey of Jenny. Her experiences are formulated by the macrosystems, that being the societal standards and cultural values, along with mesosystem concerning school and community, along with microsystems that deals with factors such as family and peers of which she is a part of, and thereby, emphasizing the interdependence of social and personal variables in progression of her trauma.

Jenny's never-ending quest to acquire achievement and recognition, could be seen as a reflection of her constant need for approval and a way out. However, her efforts finally

bring her to a downward spiral incorporating a stage of substance misuse and aimlessness, that increases her feelings of utter hopelessness and emptiness. Jenny's tendency for self-destruction is further influenced by her incapability in facing her history and to deal with her unresolved traumatic experiences. She makes use of denial and avoidance as her tool to repress her unresolved sorrow rather than asking for assistance or support in processing what actually happened to her, which eventually encourages her to behave in a destructive manner. All things considered the life Jenny is presented as a tragic illustration of the lingering consequences of her traumatic childhood as well as the ways in which her unresolved pain could take the form of destructive habits. Her experience serves as an inspiring reminder of how crucial and vital it is to acknowledge and address the traumatic experiences and pursue healing in order to overcome the chaos of it.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

There are various definitions of trauma Dominick LaCapra describes trauma as “disruptive experience that disarticulated the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered” (41). This definition gives the stark reality of how deeply trauma affects individuals. We can see that by applying various trauma theories and Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder on various situations of Jenny and Forrest that they were really traumatized. Both the characters have gone through intense trauma, but the audience only sees their resilience and willpower. Especially Forrest Gump is celebrated for achieving success on a larger scale. People mostly views his achievements as a matter of luck. Forrest gets lucky in some instances but it was his own thought process and sudden instincts which developed due to the traumatic experiences in his life, that gives or paved the way for achievements.

One of the other important reasons for the characters getting traumatized is the American mainstream culture and the historical events happening at that time. The pressure of achieving success ruined Jenny’s life, the hippie lifestyle that she adopted were also a result of this fitting into culture pressure. She didn’t want to get behind. The historical events on the other hand like Vietnam war, civil rights movements and the political turmoil also gives nothing but pain to the characters. Many soldiers lose their lives and one other important fact is that lieutenant Dan wanted to die in the war just like his father and forefathers. These kinds of familial and social pressures lead only to bad outcomes in the movie and in real life too.

Forrest and Jenny had completely different lives and they meet completely different outcomes. Two childhood friends both having bad childhood (in Forrest's case the bullying and disability and Jenny being abused by her father) and also having each other to support, still they meted with different outcomes. As we analyse their respective cases, we come to know that it was because of the decisions they took that a difference in endings were made. At the end of the movie Jenny wishes to live a good life but it was too late for her. Her bad decisions and not acknowledging her pains finally caught up to her. She indulged in bad habits like taking drugs to forget about her pains. She even pushed away her one and only true friend Forrest. She even rejects his love whenever he confesses his affection for Jenny. Jenny could've just accepted Forrest's help when he landed the helping hands. She wanted to be alone fighting her own battles without any help. The thing that she forgot is that human needs other humans to survive. Just as we are eager to help, we should be willing to accept help.

If Jenny had sought mental help at the right time instead of going after drugs, she could have saved herself. But she was not ready to open up to others she was not even ready to accept that she had trauma. All her the one thing that Jenny learnt well was running away from her problems. Jenny was ready to do anything to achieve the things that she wanted. In a scene Jenny is seen completely nude and singing with a guitar this scene shows her struggles to get some opportunities. Due to her destructive behaviour, she engages in multiple sexual relationships with men she hardly knew without knowing that it will ultimately lead to her death. This was one of her gravest mistakes that she rejected Forrest, whom loves her truly and will do anything to protect her, to be with men who are abusive to her. Jenny realizes her mistakes when she is living with her child and is trying to restart her



life. Jenny tries to make things right she marries Forrest so that little Forrest will not be alone. If only she had adopted this attitude initially Jenny wouldn't have been caught with AIDS and would've been alive.

In one scene Jenny throws stones at her childhood or father's house. This is because she considers her father to be the reason for her traumas that led to her ruin. She took out all her anger and pain from her mind with this activity, which gave her relief and changed her attitude. Jenny always wanted to be liberated from her traumas she gets it only by her death. The shot of birds flying away after her death depicts Jenny being liberated and free and going to a place where she will be happy or in serenity. "The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect" (Levine).

Forrest on the other hand has a life of popularity and filled with amazing achievement even though he too had complex trauma. Forrest has always looked towards everything with a positive mindset. Forrest even though he had many painful experiences he never indulged in bad or self-destructive activities to forget about them. He open-heartedly welcomed other people into his life therefore he had good friends like Bubba and lieutenant Dan. Forrest's desire to make friends is vividly visible when he talks with strangers about his life. Here too he likes to talk only about the positive things that has happened to him. Forrest wanted to forget his pains and live a good life with Jenny. That's why he asks her "would you marry me, Jenny?" (Zemeckis, 1:48). But here too his expectations hurt him.

"No experience is a cause of success or failure. We do not suffer from the shock of our experiences, so-called trauma but we make out of them just what suits our purposes" (Adler). Forrest could've also took drugs to forget help him through his trauma but he always

knew what was right and what was wrong. There is scene which shows the meeting of Forrest and lieutenant Dan in Forrest's wedding here we can see their smile and respect for each other for their never giving up spirit. Forrest even inspired lieutenant Dan a man who had lost all hope because his legs were lost in the war. Just seeing Forrest and being with him inspired lieutenant Dan to live again. If Jenny had allowed, Forrest could've played the role that his mother played in his life. Despite his own limitations and the absence of a mother figure Forrest was able to raise his kid in a happy and healthy environment. This shows his ability to find solace even in little things. The tragedies in his life made him stronger. Thus, we can see that different approaches to trauma can and will lead to different outcomes.

In these times trauma study is very important. Due to the increasing awareness on mental health, trauma studies play an important role in shedding light on the impact of traumatic experiences on individuals as well as communities. It gives insights into efficient response and recovery methods. It also guides professionals and others in addressing the needs of survivors and to facilitate healing. Trauma studies also gives various preventive measures to reduce the frequency in the occurrence of traumatic events.

The movie Forrest Gump is a pioneer in talking human mentality, more importantly its incredible depth in portraying deep and life-long aftermaths of traumatic incidents is praiseworthy. This story not only talks about a human beings' wonderful journey, his blessed encounters or his exceptional milestones. It also gives an insight of people living in trauma, their constant struggles to keep the monsters at bay, their confused and delirious state of mind with which they navigate their day-to-day lives, their strong mindset with which they face the difficulties head on hoping there will be a rainbow at the end of the storm. The love that Forrest has for Jenny is helpful to Forrest in so many ways he can't imagine, it urges his

aching heart to find comfort and balance in living, it has the power to transform his confusion into clarity. Traumas does not only apply to Forrest in this movie, he is not the only one to endure tragedies. Jenny is another character who we will feel sorry for while watching this movie. This story lets us to fully understand the individual emotions of various people and this in turn helps the viewers to deeply understand the story's themes that are far-reaching and thought provoking. Forrest Gump remains a great human being by despite facing the cruelty of the world and enduring it on a daily basis he still reminds us to have forgiveness, empathy and compassion that will ultimately lead us to a brighter future, a future where all our sorrows would have made way for joy.

Thus, the research travelled through the life of Forrest and Jenny to prove that they both had trauma. It also discussed how different approaches to trauma can lead to different outcomes.

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