

TRAUMA THE ANTIDOTE OF TRAUMA: FOREST WHITAKER'S *HOPE FLOATS*

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The paper focuses on the effect of trauma based on the movie *Hope Floats* directed by Forest Whitaker and released in 1998. The central character Birdee Pruitt (nee Calvert) played by Sandra Bullock has been taken for study for the paper. The paper focuses on the three different kinds of traumas that she faces, the effects caused by each, the consequences faced and the resulting rejuvenation. The 'trauma theory' has been applied to the movie as the theoretical framework of the paper in order to analyze the central character. The paper examines if trauma helps overcome a previous traumatic experience and the cause and effect thereby involved during the process.

Keywords: Trauma – hope – responsibilities – dejection – motivation

Introduction

The 1998 movie *Hope Floats* has been directed by Forest Whitaker. The story revolves around Birdee Pruitt (nee Calvert) and her journey of regaining lost hope. The movie opens with Birdee being informed about her husband and best friend's affair on national television with their daughter as one among the audience. Birdee is deeply hurt but stays strong for the sake of her daughter Bernice and decides to move in with her mother in Smithsville. Having lost all hope, Birdee tries to regain herself for the sake of her daughter but is not able to realize the gap growing between her daughter and herself. Ramona Calvert, Birdee's mother takes care of Birdee, Bernice and Travis, Birdee's nephew. Bernice grows closer to her grandmother but unfortunately Ramona meets her sudden death. The death of her mother, Ramona Calvert, is yet another blow to Birdee and Bernice, her daughter, who was getting attached to her grandmother. This second trauma in her life sparks a kind of strength within herself that she was trying to ignite since arriving at Smithsville.

Review of Literature

Rev. Doug Pratt makes reference to the movie *Hope Floats* in order to explain the essential attitude of hope in his sermon *Hope Floats our Boats* published in *The First Word* in 2014. Eleanor Huang in a newsletter titled *Hope Floats at AACCS* (2010) makes reference to the movie *Hope Floats* in order to bring hope among the readers and to promote AACCS, a community welfare group. Peter Kramer in his book *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (2004) dedicates the fifth chapter to talk about Sandra Bullock as a performer. McCullick *et al* in their article *Butches*,

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Bullies and Buffoons: Images of Physical Education Teachers in the Movies (2003) uses *Hope Floats* as one among eighteen movies to examine the cinematic images of physical educators from two perspectives, namely, framing and social cognition.

Theoretical Framework

Chris Baldick defines trauma theory in the following manner:

A body of 20th-century psychological research into the effects upon people of various traumatic events (assault, rap, war, famine, incarceration, etc.), leading to the official recognition in the 1980s of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Concepts developed from that work have since the 1990s been taken up and developed as an interdisciplinary field of study involving literature, psychology, history, and philosophy, with a concentration upon questions of memory, forgetting, and narrative. The impact of trauma theory on literary studies was felt from the publication of essays... Since then, a number of specialized critical writings have applied trauma theory to the memoirs of Holocaust survivors and war veterans, and to topics such as sexual violence in women's fiction. (340)

The protagonist of the movie *Hope Floats* faces humiliation and desolation when her husband and best friend announce their affair and willingness to marry in front of her daughter Bernice on national television. This causes high levels of stress and can be viewed as a traumatic experience where she feels desolated, left alone, and responsible for her daughter who would not understand the intensity of this situation.

Hope Shattered

Having been in a long term relationship with Bill Pruitt and later having married him and raising a child together, Birdee had been leading a happy and satisfied life till she was invited as guest on a talk show along with her best friend Connie and husband Bill. The talk show is used as a platform to inform Birdee about the affair her husband has been having with her best friend and his desire to marry Connie. Birdee's emotions are clearly portrayed on screen as her smile fades away and she gets lost in a tsunami of thoughts and emotions she needs to process. The trauma Birdee undergoes is clearly evident on her face. The moment she notices her daughter Bernice in the audience Birdee tries to stay strong and tries to display courage.

As a result of the on-air revelation, Birdee decides to move to Smithsville with Bernice to stay with her mother Ramona. In order to come out of this traumatic experience and to return to a stable condition Birdee chooses Smithsville, her hometown, near Texas, where she was born and raised before she settled down with Bill. Though Bernice misses her father and is confused about the sudden changes happening around her, Birdee tries to help Bernice hold on to the hope

that she lost. She believes that a fresh start would help them both create a stable environment for themselves.

Bernice is enrolled in the school Birdee attended. They move in with Ramona, the place she grew up in. Birdee chooses a familiar environment for them to start afresh. This sense of familiarity would assist in regaining the lost hope, crushed emotions and shattered dreams. Though Birdee makes the right choices for their future, Bernice is too young to comprehend. This gap created because of the sudden traumatic experience causes a greater rift between Bernice and Birdee.

Bernice feels dejected and abandoned by her mother who she feels is not taking any interest in her anymore. As a result of this gap between the two, Bernice wishes to live with her father. Birdee is not able to notice such minute details in her daughter as she is preoccupied with the fear of the future and the responsibilities she has toward Bernice. Birdee is struggling with a bit of a drinking issue as she tries to get over the traumatic experience. With Ramona's eccentric support and assertive encouragement she sobers up and goes in search of a job as a responsible adult.

Birdee meets some of her old acquaintances and school mates many of whom she does not recognize. She realizes how superficial she had been during her early years as a young adult. Having faced the realities of the world and cumbering the responsibility of being a mother, Birdee apologizes for her earlier behaviors and works towards mending her approach to life. Justin, her old boyfriend, has a soft spot for her in his heart. He tries to show his support but Birdee is reluctant given the unfortunate incident she faced with Bill and Connie. Birdee begins to see things that are happening around her in its actual intentions but is confused and reluctant about taking any chances as she fears the possibility of getting hurt again.

Hope Regained

Birdee has resettled in her comfort zone – her hometown, Smithville. She's back living with her mother and finds solace in the fact that she has a place to return during the time of distress. This helps Birdee relax but simultaneously she begins to depend on her mother more than intended. In the process of reviving herself to her former self, Birdee misses to notice the changes in her daughter's life and attitude.

Bernice gradually begins to retreat into a shell, away from her mother, the only person she has been familiar and close with since before arriving at Smithville. Birdee does not notice this retraction of Bernice as she is trying to get her perspectives into focus. In the mean time, Bernice needs to face a school full of bullies when in reality she wished to make friends in her new school. Having to face this nightmare on a daily basis at school, Bernice wishes her mother would take notice of her and help her through it. But she understands her mother is preoccupied with other essentials of life and withdraws into a shell.

Ramona is a lively person and has an optimistic outlook at life. Her habit of repeating “my cup runneth over” motivates Bernice to be thankful for what she has instead of being moody about those that she does not have. For instance, Ramona is worried about her husband cared for at a home as he suffers from Alzheimer’s disease but she keeps herself busy caring for her grandchildren with a smile on her face. These qualities of Ramona draw Bernice closer to her grandmother.

Ramona starts to take care of Bernice along with Travis, whom she is looking after as his mother is away trying to make a living. Travis is Bernice’s only company and solace at school. Bernice secretly wishes for her father to come and get her as she misses the way her mother used to care for her, like fixing her breakfast, packing her lunch, asking about her day at school and the like. The sudden outburst between Birdee and Bernice following Birdee’s conversation over the phone with Bill helps set things into a balancing motion.

From the conversation with Bill, Birdee learns of Bernice’s understanding of the split between the couple. Bernice is concerned that both her mother and she are sad about the way things turned out with Bill. Bernice’s longing for her father is yet another reason for Birdee refraining from taking a chance with Justin. She does not want Bernice to move further away from her. Ramona is happy that Birdee is willing to take a chance with Justin. This shows that Birdee has started to come out of her traumatic shell.

Though it is said that time heals, Birdee does not undergo complete healing till the sudden death of her mother. This is the second blow that Birdee faces while Bernice understands the intensity of this loss. Birdee cries miserably prior to attending Ramona’s funeral which helps to maintain her stead. Bill attends the funeral and later visits Birdee at home. Bernice is overjoyed as she presumes her father has come to take her with him. She even packs her bag and runs behind him to the car but he tells her that Connie and he need time to themselves. This is the worst traumatic experience that Bernice encounters. She is heartbroken and dejected. Birdee watches all this from the porch and carries a crying Bernice back home from the street.

The second encounter with Bill proves to be traumatic for Bernice but her pain and misery motivates Birdee to prioritize Bernice over herself. This gives Birdee the strength to face the reality of their lives concerning Bill and move past him for the sake of her daughter. Birdee proves to be strong headed and focuses on Bernice. She even musters the courage and hope to take a chance with Justin who stands by Birdee, Bernice and Travis. Justin is seen giving hope to Travis and lifting his spirits up. As the movie comes to a close it is seen that Birdee and Bernice have regained their bond, Justin has joined the Calvert Pruitt family along with Birdee, Bernice and Travis. Though Birdee is not ready for marriage, she has opened up to have Justin be a part of her life and is seen taking one step at a time as she regains hope.

Conclusion

Birdee was emotionally and mentally assaulted on national television in front an audience of strangers. Bernice is made to witness the shocking revelation by Bill and Connie about their affair. The intensity of this situation is equivalent to any traumatic experience. In a moment Birdee loses her best friend, her husband and is forced to take sole responsibility for her daughter despite the traumatic abandonment. Though Ramona was not able to completely help Birdee find a solution to her trauma, the moment Bernice faces trauma Birdee regains all her strength and fights her depressing trauma to reassure Bernice that she is loved and means the world to Birdee. This trauma that Bernice faces motivates Birdee to regain hope in order to give Bernice hope. Through this study it is seen that a traumatic experience and the shock it causes helps overcome a previous trauma.

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