

## SYMBOLISM OF CHILD TRAUMA IN *THE SAND CASTLE*

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### ABSTRACT

*The Sand Castle* is a film that represents the experience of child trauma in the context of war through subtle visual symbols that are not expressed verbally. The study of child trauma in visual media is important because traumatic experiences at an early age often appear implicitly, thus requiring an interpretive approach to be understood more deeply. This research aims to: (1) identify visual symbols that represent child trauma, (2) analyze the relationship between signifier and signified based on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, and (3) explain the function of the imaginative world of child characters as a medium of representation of traumatic experiences. This research uses a descriptive-qualitative method with structural semiotic analysis. The research data consisted of selected scenes featuring non-verbal expressions, symbolic objects, and a visual atmosphere consistent with the representation of trauma. The selection of data was purposive, while the analysis was carried out in three stages: identification of sign units, grouping of meanings, and interpretation of sign relationships in psychological contexts. The results show that visual symbols, such as shipwrecks, shadows, and objects belonging to other characters, contain emotional content that represents loss, fear, and hope. In addition, the imaginative world of the child characters is shown to function as a symbolic mechanism to express suffering that is difficult to articulate directly. These findings indicate that film not only presents an aesthetic narrative, but can also be a reflective medium to understand the dynamics of child trauma. Thus, this research contributes to the study of trauma psychology while expanding the perspective of visual media studies on the representation of children's suffering in the context of conflict.

**Keywords:** childhood trauma, visual psychology, symbolism, semiotics, *The Sand Castle*

### INTRODUCTION

Children growing up in conflict zones often experience prolonged psychological distress, even after the war has ended. A review conducted by Hashemi & Mahmoudzadeh shows that children living in war situations have a high risk of developing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Hashemi & Mahmoudzadeh, 2025). Although they are not structurally excluded from society, the trauma they experience shapes their social interaction patterns differently than children who grow up in a stable environment. Children who experience psychological distress due to conflict tend to express their anxiety through symbolic processes such as

imaginative play and metaphorical storytelling. These activities not only function as a form of self-protection but also represent their alienation from an uncertain social reality (Absor, 2024).

In addition to the psychological impact, children living in conflict also have difficulty finding their identity and do not even feel part of their community. Violence and loss make it difficult for them to adapt to their surroundings (Mzawak et al., 2025). Some children who grow up in war situations tend to withdraw or even become more aggressive as a way to protect themselves (Achwan & Kardifa, 2025). While they remain part of society, their position is often unclear, and they are considered victims, but are also required to adjust to changing circumstances

(Widyantoro, 2022). As a result, these children are more vulnerable to exploitation, such as being forced to work, recruited by armed groups, or experiencing difficulties in getting an education and a decent social life. This is in accordance with research conducted by World Mental Health, involving nearly 70,000 respondents in 24 countries found that 70.4% of individuals have experienced trauma, one of which is trauma due to war as many as 34.1% of individuals (Engelhard et al., 2007).

Trauma is understood as a serious emotional response to a threatening event, which, according to the DSM-5, can be characterized by symptoms of intrusion, avoidance, negative mood, and increased excitability. Herman (1997) emphasizes the presence of recurrent trauma in victims of war or domestic violence, while Caruth (1996) sees trauma as a disruption of memory and representation that presents through dreams or flashbacks. Prolonged symptoms can develop into PTSD, which is often addressed through imagination or symbolic expression. To trace the traces of trauma in the movie *The Sand Castle*, this research also uses Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics. In this case, trauma theory serves to identify the psychological symptoms and mechanisms displayed in the narrative, while semiotics provides the tools to interpret how these symptoms are encoded through visual symbols, signs, and signifier-signified relations. By combining the two, this research is able to reveal how the movie builds a symbolic language of trauma through the imaginative world of children.

Mental health disorders are also depicted in the movie *The Sand Castle* (Brown, 2024), which runs on Netflix for 1 hour and 37 minutes. The movie originates from Lebanon and is directed by Matty Brown. The movie depicts the life of a girl named Jana and her family, who are stranded on a deserted island. They try to survive on the island and scavenge for food to live, only for the past to be revealed, plunging them into bitter events. The director mentions at the end of the movie that it is dedicated to children forced to live in their own fantasies to survive. This sentence reinforces the interpretation that the imaginary world is a form of psychological escape from the traumatic reality of war. Despite its short duration and lack of dialogue, the movie contains many strong symbolic visual elements that hold deep meanings related to the psychological wounds experienced by the main character. The reality of trauma is not presented explicitly, but through a series of symbols, visual atmosphere, and character gestures that represent complex inner conditions. Therefore, the approach of trauma theory and semiotics is important because it allows researchers to uncover how trauma is represented through visual signs and how the characters' inner experiences are structured in the narrative and symbols displayed.

A number of previous studies have uncovered various representations of trauma in media and literature. Andrianto (2021) conducted research on the movie *27 Steps of May*, which represents post-traumatic stress disorder through in-depth visualization

of May's stress coping process, which is displayed through visual elements such as appearance and gestures, and emphasizes that May's recovery occurs due to her own willpower. Simon (2021) The movie *G30S/PKI* shows that small narratives in movies can be a means of healing intergenerational trauma by confronting and reflecting on the past. Zulfiya (2024) uses a semiotic approach to show that trauma in the movie affects the characters' physical, psychological, and social conditions in complex ways. Damayanti (2024) analyzed the movie *Dear David* with Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to reveal the representation of sexual abuse against men, which causes trauma and shows how the stigma of toxic masculinity often makes victims ignored in a patriarchal culture. Nabilla (2025) analyzed Allison's character in the movie *A Good Person* with a descriptive qualitative approach to identify types of comorbid PTSD and self-defense mechanisms, which are dominated by denial and influenced by imbalances in personality structure according to Freud's theory. Fristiani (2024) used Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach to analyze the representation of trauma in the drama *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*, which depicts trauma and coping strategies of the main character through visual and verbal elements, and reflects the reality of trauma in South Korea.

This research has a common thread with a number of previous studies that also examine the representation of trauma in the medium of movie, both through psychological and semiotic approaches. Andrianto (2021) emphasizes adult trauma recovery through coping, while this research directs attention to childhood experiences expressed through symbols. Simon (2021) highlights trauma as a social legacy across generations, and Zulfiya (2024) looks at the complexity of trauma in a multidimensional manner, while this study emphasizes the aspect of hidden symbolism. Meanwhile, Damayanti (2024) used Barthes' semiotics, and Fristiani (2024) used Peirce's semiotics, both of which differ from this research, which relies on Saussure's semiotics to unravel the signifier-signified relationship. Nabilla (2025) examines trauma from Freud's psychoanalytic perspective on adult characters, in contrast to this study, which relates children's trauma to the symbolism of imagination. Thus, this research occupies a different space by combining trauma theory and Saussure's semiotics to highlight how the movie *The Sand Castle* displays children's imagination as an escape mechanism from trauma.

Based on the similarities and differences between this research and a number of previous studies that have been discussed previously, the position of this research lies in its contribution to expanding the study of the representation of child trauma in the medium of movie, using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, which has not been widely used specifically in the context of child trauma. This research offers a new perspective by focusing on visual and verbal symbols that manifest children's

traumatic experiences, as well as highlighting how the imaginary space in the movie *The Sand Castle* becomes a form of psychological protection from the impact of violence. The scientific urgency of this research lies in its contribution to enriching the study of child trauma in movie through the analysis of visual signs, thereby opening space for cross-disciplinary discussions on how trauma is articulated and understood in cultural and media contexts. The objectives of this study are: (1) to reveal the symbolic meaning of trauma experienced by child characters in the movie *The Sand Castle*, (2) to explain how trauma is represented through signs and the relationship between signifier and signified according to Saussure, and (3) to analyze how children's imaginative world becomes a medium of survival as well as a form of communication of unspoken suffering.

## METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with a semiotic approach and trauma psychology as the main analytical tool. The relationship between the two is constructed sequentially and complementary. This method was chosen because it is suitable for studying trauma representation in movies, as meaning is not always explicitly present but rather conveyed through visual narratives, symbols, and characters' emotional expressions. The movie *The Sand Castle* is treated as an audiovisual text that presents a representation of the experiences of child victims of war. Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic method in this study is applied through three steps: first, selecting relevant signs in the movie such as colors, objects, movements, or dialogue second, classifying the signs into visual, audio, and gestural categories, third, analyzing the relationship between the signifier (the form of the sign) and the signified (the meaning contained). Then, the signs found will be interpreted through the framework of trauma psychology, with reference to the concepts of Caruth (1996), Herman (1997), and the criteria for PTSD in the DSM-5. At this stage, semiotics serves to uncover symbolic meanings, while trauma theory provides an interpretive framework for how these symbols represent the symptoms and impact of trauma on children.

The primary data source in this research is the movie *The Sand Castle* (Matty Brown, 2025); the secondary data is obtained from scientific literature, journal articles, and books relevant to the theme of child trauma. These sources are used not only as a theoretical basis but also as comparative material to strengthen the analysis of the movie. Data collection was conducted through audiovisual text analysis by carefully and repeatedly watching the movie. This analysis focused on scenes, characters, and visual symbols that represent child trauma. The data analysis procedure was carried out sequentially, as described. First, the researcher identifies visual and verbal signs that appear in the movie, such as colors,

objects, movements, and dialogue. Second, the signs were analyzed using Saussure's semiotics to see the relationship between signifier and signified, resulting in symbolic meaning. Third, the results of the semiotic analysis are then interpreted through the framework of trauma psychology by referring to the theories of Caruth, Herman, and the criteria of PTSD in DSM-5. The results of this study are expected to reveal the symbols of child trauma in the movie *The Sand Castle* and explain the psychological meaning behind the representation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Trauma is not only a focus of study in the medical field, but also in the realm of literary, cultural, and movie studies (Mohácsi, 2021). Among trauma studies, figures such as Caruth and Herman (1997) emphasize that trauma has a narrative dimension that is not only experienced, but also told and represented in various forms of media (Rosida & Ahmad Hikam, 2025). In this context, trauma is understood as a psychological wound that often reappears in the form of stories, symbols, or repeated actions. Movie, as a visual medium, has the unique power to represent trauma through images, sounds, and symbols, making it an important tool in studying this psychological phenomenon (Ikhwan, 2025).

Trauma is generally defined as an emotional response to an event that threatens safety or causes great suffering, either physically or psychologically. One of the main characteristics of trauma is the individual's unawareness of the ongoing traumatic experience at the time of the event. The brain's inability to rapidly process the shock of an unexpected event creates a gap between the trauma and the return to full consciousness (Saragih, 2023). In the realm of clinical psychology, the American Psychiatric Association through the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual edition V) categorizes trauma symptoms into several main groups, namely intrusion (sudden appearance of traumatic memories), avoidance (avoidance of things that remind of trauma), negative cognition and mood (negative feelings such as guilt, shame, or fear), and arousal (excessive reactions such as irritability or difficulty sleeping). These symptoms characterize how traumatic experiences can continue to haunt survivors even after the event has passed (Barathie & Karam, 2025) (Yuliana & Praptawati, 2025).

Expanding on this view, McKay (2024) emphasizes the need for a precise definition of trauma to prevent the overgeneralization of difficult life experiences. They argue that not every painful event should be classified as clinical trauma, since doing so risks weakening the validity of the PTSD diagnosis (McKay et al., 2024). This awareness of the need for a firm definition of trauma has actually been officially recognized since 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association first classified the psychological response to traumatic experiences as a mental disorder under the

name post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)(Herman, 1997). This recognition marked an important moment in the history of clinical psychology, as trauma symptoms that were previously considered vague now had a more systematic diagnostic framework. In response to the complexity of trauma, which is not always acute, Herman (1997) later developed an approach that highlighted ongoing and systematic trauma, such as that experienced by child victims of war or domestic violence. He revealed that common trauma symptoms include: hyperarousal (vigilant response to potential danger), intrusion (recurrent occurrence of traumatic memories), and constriction (loss of energy and power to deal with traumatic experiences). Herman (1997) also emphasized that recovery from trauma is not only psychological, but also closely related to the social and cultural dimensions of trauma.

Continuing Herman's (1997) perspective above, Caruth (1996) presents a more theoretical and narrative approach. She focuses on how trauma disrupts a person's system of representation and memory. In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is a response to a sudden event that cannot be fully experienced as it unfolds, but returns recurrently in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, or other intrusive phenomena. Through this approach, she shows that trauma is not only a psychological injury, but also a crisis in the transmission of experience, where traumatic events often cannot be told in full and continue to haunt through symbolic repetition.

The impact of long-lasting trauma not only affects the physical, but also leaves scars on the mental state. This is the main root of the psychological disorder known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As explained by Caruth in Tambunan (2021), it can last for years, during which various triggers can revive traumatic memories accompanied by intense emotional and physical reactions. Sufferers often constantly relive the experience through dreams, hallucinations, or compulsive repetition, and show a tendency to avoid anything related to the trauma, even to the point of having difficulty talking about it. One effective approach to helping traumatized individuals and groups is to encourage them to recount the experience (Ramadhan, 2023). As such, they may be better able to process and cope with the trauma than if they just act it out without verbally expressing it.

The approach to trauma in *The Sand Castle* is not only seen from a psychological perspective, but also reinforced through semiotic studies to understand how the meaning of trauma is visually constructed. Referring to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, every sign consists of a signifier, which is the visual or material form, and a signified, which is the concept or meaning associated with it (Saussure, 1959). In the context of movie, elements such as red shoes, shadows, or burning buildings can be read as signifiers of traces of trauma: loss, fear, or lingering memories. Through this relationship between signifier and signified, the movie forms a system of representation that reflects the character's inner state. The symbols not only reflect

trauma, but also communicate it to the audience, in line with Caruth's (1996) view that trauma often appears indirectly through repetition or symbolic depiction. Thus, integrating trauma theory and semiotics allows for a deeper reading of how traumatic experiences are not only felt but also interpreted through the movie's visual narrative structure.

Imagination as a trauma escape mechanism becomes a central theme in understanding how children cope with extreme psychological pressure. Broadly speaking, imagination is understood as the mental capacity to form representations or images in the mind (Burns, 2024). Kearney also highlighted this by stating that humans live in a world that tends to glorify fantasy over reality. In the context of trauma psychology, imagination is often a psychic escape route used by individuals, especially children, to protect themselves from painful realities (Lijtmaer, 2022). According to Caruth (1996), trauma is not just the event itself, but how it lives on and haunts the victim's mind through dreams, repetition, and symbols. For children, escape into imaginative worlds is not a form of denial per se, but rather a survival strategy against a reality too harsh to face head-on. Imagination allows them to 'control' the uncontrollable environment in the real world. To clarify the reading of the data, the following is a cut of the corresponding scene;

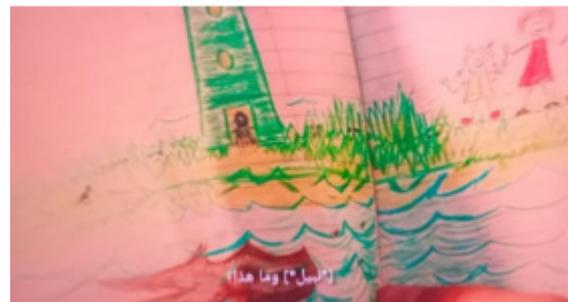


Figure 1 Jana draws family, lighthouses and shipwrecks

نابيل : ماذا ترسمين لنا  
 جنى : أنظر، هؤلاء نحن وهذه منارتنا  
 نابيل : منارة؟  
 جنى : إهمم  
 نابيل : وما هذا؟  
 جنى : إنه شيء في البحر

Nabil : What are you drawing for us?  
 Jana : Look, this is us and this is our lighthouse.  
 Nabil : Lighthouse?  
 Jana : Hmmm  
 Nabil : And what is it?  
 Jana : It's something in the sea.

Figure 1 illustrates Jana's drawing, which reveals her attempt to reshape reality through symbols. The picture of her family signifies the longing for complete

togetherness, the picture of the lighthouse reflects hope and guidance amidst the "fog" of trauma, while the shipwreck symbolizes destruction and helplessness in the face of chaos caused by war. At first glance, this scene looks like a typical children's drawing activity, but it actually holds a strong symbolic representation of the character's psychological condition. These symbols indicate that Jana is not playing with her imagination in a neutral way, but is performing a mechanism of "re-reading" the traumatic experience in a visual form. To concretely illustrate how imagination and symbolic elements represent trauma in the movie *The Sand Castle*, the following table presents selected scenes along with their semiotic interpretations based on Saussure's theory and the corresponding trauma symptoms.

Table 1 Findings of trauma and semiotic symbols in the movie *The Sand Castle*

Scene	Symbol Analysis (Saussurean Semiotics)	Trauma Analysis
Jana drew a family, a lighthouse, and a shipwreck	Signifier: a picture of a family, a lighthouse, and a shipwreck. Signified: hope and the trauma of destruction	Negatif Cognition & Constriction

Table 1 presents the interpretation of Jana's drawing as part of the movie *The Sand Castle's* visual text. In Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, this image functions as a signifier, while the meaning it contains is a signified. Ferdinand de Saussure explains that meaning is not inherent in the object itself, but is formed through the relationship between signifier and signified (Saussure, 1959). Jana's picture is a signifier that represents an emotional and symbolic sign of longing, trauma, and hope. That is, the drawing is a sign that contains a deeper psychological meaning than just a child's scribble.

Furthermore, based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association, trauma symptoms can appear in the form of negative cognition and mood, such as feelings of sadness, pessimism, or hopelessness (Putri et al., 2024). In this context, the image of the shipwreck can be interpreted as a subconscious expression of Jana's feelings of hopelessness and helplessness in saving her family. Meanwhile, the lighthouse, despite its positive connotation, shows hope that may have faded or is simply an imagination as a form of coping mechanism.

Herman (1997) mentions that in the constriction phase, trauma victims can experience withdrawal from reality and build a 'new reality' that is more controllable (Fadilah, 2024). In this case, trauma is present through the activity of drawing. Jana indirectly escapes from

situations of violence and loss through her imaginative world, a symbolic space that is free from the destruction she experiences in the real world. This is a strategy to maintain psychological stability in the midst of mental collapse. Beyond the realm of imagination, another important dimension in understanding trauma lies in the use of symbols (Annisa & Praptawati, 2025).

Symbols often serve as an extension of traumatic memories, both individually and collectively (Abrutyn, 2024). Trauma is not only stored in the form of linear narratives but also in the form of fragments and symbols that haunt individuals unconsciously. These symbols appear as 'psychic scars' that are not easily processed by rational logic, but can be recognized in the form of visuals or certain recurring objects. In this context, symbols can represent the collective memory of communities that experience war or systemic violence. Collective memory is formed through visual and cultural elements that are recognized by the group, such as places, objects, or rituals (Sidjabat, 2024). Therefore, the appearance of symbols in movies such as shoes, sand, or small objects is not only a cinematic ornament but also a carrier of deep historical and psychological meanings. The next scene depicts Jana building a sand castle, an activity that may seem like ordinary play, but symbolically reflects a deeper meaning of trauma and hope amidst the chaos of war. To clarify the reading of the data, the following is a cut of the corresponding scene;



Figure 2 Jana made a castle out of sand

Figure 2 captures the moment when Jana builds a sandcastle, at first glance, a simple and harmless childhood activity. However, the discovery of a yellow object buried beneath the sand, followed by the faint sound of screams heard by Jana when she leans closer, turns this moment into something deeply symbolic. The act of digging and uncovering the object suggests a metaphorical unearthing of buried trauma. The yellow object, seemingly inanimate, becomes a medium through which the hidden pain of war is unexpectedly revealed. Jana's reaction pausing and listening indicates her unconscious engagement with a past that refuses to stay silent. The sand, typically associated with play and impermanence, here becomes the medium that conceals horror, while the act of listening signifies the child's sensitivity to the echoes of violence that linger just beneath the surface of ordinary life. To support a

theoretical reading of the visuals, the following table presents a mapping between the symbolic elements in the scene and key concepts from Saussure's semiotic theory and trauma psychology frameworks.

Table 2 Findings of trauma and semiotic symbols in the movie *The Sand Castle*

Scene	Symbol Analysis (Saussurean Semiotics)	Trauma Analysis
Jana builds a sand castle and finds a yellow object with screams underneath	Signifier: sand castles and yellow objects accompanied by the sound of screaming. Signified: an attempt to survive and there is hidden trauma.	Intrusion & Flashback

Table 2 presents a semiotic and psychological interpretation of the yellow object scene, drawing on Saussure's theory and trauma psychology. In Saussure's semiotics, a sign consists of two elements: the signifier and the signified. In this scene, the yellow object is the signifier, the concrete visual form seen by Jana and the audience. The signified is the screaming sound coming out of the object, which refers to the deep meaning of suffering, violence, or death caused by war.

The object, although not specifically recognizable, serves as a symbol of collective trauma embedded in the ground, literally 'buried' in the sand, and metaphorically indicates the trauma hidden yet still alive in Jana's subconscious. The brilliant yellow color also contrasts with the sinister sound, suggesting that even ordinary objects can carry traces of past wounds. Trauma is not always present as a direct narrative, but rather as "an experience that is not fully assimilated by consciousness," and returns in the form of repetition like a scream coming out of an inanimate object (Woods et al., 2024). The sound has no obvious visual source, creating a psychological tension synonymous with intrusion, which is the sudden reappearance of a traumatic memory.

In the DSM-5 classification, this scene shows symptoms of symbolic intrusion: although there is no direct explosion, the sound of screams in the object illustrates how the suffering of war infiltrates the safe space and activities of children. This also ties in with Herman's (notion of hyperarousal, as the screams trigger an anxious reaction and heightened alertness in Jana, even though she herself is not in a direct war situation at the time. The phenomenon of buried objects making sounds in the movie *The Sand Castle* can be read as a symbol of unresolved trauma.

Traumatic experiences do not just stop at the past, but infiltrate back into the present in the form of flashbacks and memory intrusions (Khosyi, 2024). These flashbacks are not just ordinary memories but come with an emotional intensity that seems real

again to the victim. In the movie *The Sand Castle*, this flashback is presented not verbally but through visuals and a very symbolic atmosphere. This is in line with Caruth's idea that trauma is an experience that "comes back without really being told" and appears in the form of repetitions or images of previous experiences that interfere with present consciousness. To clarify the reading of the data, the following is a cut of the corresponding scene;



Figure 3 Jana found the red shoes

Figure 3 depicts the moment when Jana discovers a pair of red shoes that belonged to her deceased friend. Although there is no explicit dialogue, Jana's facial expression and the way she handles the shoes reveal a deep emotional connection. The red shoes are not merely objects, but symbols of separation and the loss of childhood. The color red serves as a powerful visual element that signifies tragedy, loss, and death embedded in memory. This moment marks the reappearance of traumatic memories through an object that visually connects Jana to her painful past.

Table 3 Findings of trauma and semiotic symbols in the movie *The Sand Castle*

Scene	Symbol Analysis (Saussurean Semiotics)	Trauma Analysis
Jana finds her dead friend's red shoes	Signifier: red shoes Signified: death, loss of childhood	Intrusion & Flashback

Table 3 presents a semiotic interpretation of the red shoes as symbols of loss and childhood trauma experienced by Jana. Semiotically, within Ferdinand de Saussure's framework, the red shoes act as a signifier (concrete visual sign) that refers to the signified, which is death, loss, and the breakdown of Jana's childhood that should have been full of play and joy. The color red is symbolically often associated with blood or tragic loss, while the small shoe signifies the presence of a child who no longer exists. The shoe becomes a powerful visual marker of trauma: not only because it belonged to her dead friend, but because it also carries with it all the memories of Jana's war-shattered

childhood. This scene does not present the death scene directly, but relives it through the symbol of the object embodying the flashback in the form of an object.

According to the trauma symptoms described by the DSM-5, the appearance of the red shoes activates intrusion symptoms, where the trauma victim, in this case, Jana, experiences flashes of emotions and traumatic memories when confronted with symbols associated with the event. This is not just cognitive memory, but an intense, involuntary emotional response. In this case, the shoes become the ‘trigger’ that takes Jana back to the time when she lost her best friend. The flashback experienced is not in the form of a dream scene or mimicry, but in the symbolic presence of the shoes that reawaken memories and pent-up emotions.

Children growing up in conflict zones are at risk of psychological trauma that is not always physically visible. These psychological wounds often appear in the form of anxiety, excessive fear, and sleep disturbances. (Yusmi et al., 2025). In the context of trauma psychology, nightmares are one of the common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), where traumatic experiences return in symbolic form during sleep. Dreams are not just passive experiences, but manifestations of unresolved inner conflicts. Dreams play an important role as a form of repetition of traumatic experiences (Muslikhah, 2024). These experiences are often not directly recognizable to the sufferer, but return in the form of frightening and disturbing visuals. This phenomenon is consistent with Caruth's assertion that trauma is not only about events that have passed, but also how they come back to haunt in the form of recurring dreams or flashbacks. Nightmares, then, are not just a sleep experience, but rather a tangible manifestation of unhealed wounds (Güler, 2025). To clarify the reading of the data, the following is a cut of the corresponding scene;



Figure 4 Jana saw a pile of dead bodies and a burning building

Figure 4 unveils a bleak and devastating dreamscape that embodies the psychological weight of war. The piles of corpses evoke the irreversible loss faced by children of family, safety, and hope. Meanwhile, the burning building stands as a stark metaphor for the collapse not only of physical structures

but also of the emotional foundations of home and the future. The scene’s dark color palette and slow-motion pacing intensify the overwhelming sense of horror and sorrow experienced by Jana. To support a theoretical reading of the visuals, the following table presents a mapping between the symbolic elements in the scene and key concepts from Saussure's semiotic theory and trauma psychology frameworks.

Table 4 Findings of trauma and semiotic symbols in the movie *The Sand Castle*

Scene	Symbol Analysis (Saussurean Semiotics)	Trauma Analysis
Jana dreamed of seeing a pile of corpses and a burning building.	Signifier: piles of dead bodies and burning buildings. Signified: devastation and deep inner wounds.	Flashback, nightmare & intrusion

Table 4 presents the interpretation of Jana’s dream phenomenon in light of trauma theory. Jana’s dream phenomenon is in line with Caruth's theory, which states that trauma is present through flashbacks and nightmares as a form of repetition without realization. These nightmares are not just fiction, but a real representation of how traumatic events do not end at the time of their occurrence, but continue to burden victims in the form of symbolic repetition (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025). The piles of corpses that appear in Jana's dreams reflect deep fear and loss, while the burning building signifies the destruction of living space and a symbol of security that has disappeared. This can also be linked to the DSM-5 category of intrusion, which is the sudden reappearance of trauma memories that disrupt daily life.

One of the most shocking characteristics of psychological trauma is when painful past experiences continue to plague one's life in the form of illusive images or figures (Muhammed, 2024). In the movie *The Sand Castle*, trauma is not only present in the form of real events that are recalled, but also in vague visual representations, marking how trauma lives in an absence that feels very real. Figures from the past that have passed away, but still appear in the character's consciousness, become symbols of unresolved inner wounds. Trauma, in this context, is no longer just a memory, it transforms into the presence of a shadowy figure in everyday life, which continues to overshadow and create ongoing psychological anxiety. To clarify the reading of the data, the following is a cut of the corresponding scene.

Figure 5 shows the appearance of Yara’s shadow, presented through minimalist lighting and framing techniques that emphasize a sense of emptiness and silence. Yara’s figure is not fully visible but appears faint like mist or a reflection on glass, suggesting that

her presence is not physical, but rather a projection of Jana's inner psyche. This visual representation serves as the signifier of unresolved trauma, while the signified is the enduring presence of psychological wounds. In other words, Yara's shadow functions as a symbolic manifestation of the trauma that continues to haunt the protagonist. To support a theoretical interpretation of the visuals, the following table provides a mapping between the symbolic elements in the scene and key concepts from Saussure's semiotic theory and trauma psychology frameworks.



Figure 5 Jana sees Yara's shadow

Table 5 Findings of trauma and semiotic symbols in the movie *The Sand Castle*

Scene	Symbol Analysis (Saussurean Semiotics)	Trauma Analysis
Jana saw Yara's shadow	Signifier: Ghost/shadow Signified: the trauma or darkness that looms over Jana's mind as a psychological representation of fear and traumatic memories.	Intrusion & Flashback

Table 5 presents a visual interpretation of Yara's shadow. This scene explicitly shows two symptoms of trauma as described in the DSM-5 and Caruth's theory. First, in DSM-5 terminology, the appearance of the shadow can be included in the category of intrusions, which are sudden, unwanted reappearances of traumatic memories or experiences. Secondly, according to Caruth (1996), this kind of phenomenon is also a form of repetition or repetition of traumatic experiences. In her view, trauma is something that cannot be processed at the time of the event, so it comes back in the future in the form of visuals, dreams, or even deep hallucinations. As such, Yara's shadowy presence is a form of traumatic memory that cannot be forgotten, and instead appears in unexpected and haunting forms.

In the context of traumatic experiences, children often face difficulties in processing threatening

realities. Conflict situations such as war not only disrupt a sense of physical security, but also trigger persistent psychological tensions (Zahra, 2023). One common response in this condition is the search for security through certain objects that provide protective effects, both real and symbolic. The scene in the movie *The Sand Castle* shows how this mechanism works in the domestic sphere, which is filled with anxiety and fear. To clarify the reading of the data, the following is a cut of the corresponding scene;



Figure 6 Jana was given earphone by Adam

Figure 6 presents the moment when Jana is given a pair of earphones by Adam, which serve as a symbolic form of mental protection. More than just a listening device, the earphones function as an isolating medium, cutting off Jana from the terror-filled world around her. The presence of this object represents the need for a psychological safe space and reflects the character's attempt to shield herself from external stimuli that might trigger traumatic memories or fears. To support a theoretical reading of the visuals, the following table presents a mapping between the symbolic elements in the scene and key concepts from Saussure's semiotic theory and trauma psychology frameworks.

Table 6 Findings of trauma and semiotic symbols in the movie *The Sand Castle*

Scene	Symbol Analysis (Saussurean Semiotics)	Trauma Analysis
Jana was scared because there was a threatening voice from outside and Adam gave her earphones so that Jana would not feel scared.	Signifier: earphone Signified: protection from fear	Avoidance & Hyperarousal

Table 6 presents a visual interpretation of Jana's use of earphones as a form of avoidance. This scene is relevant to the concept of avoidance in DSM-5, which

is a strategy of avoiding trauma triggers, whether in the form of thoughts, feelings, or external stimuli. The sound of threats from outside the house becomes an anxiety-inducing stimulus, and Jana's use of earphones is a concrete form of avoidance. She doesn't want to hear anything that reminds her of danger, and this shows a subconscious attempt to manage fear.

Simultaneously, Jana's state of tension also indicates symptoms of hyperarousal, as proposed by Herman (1997). In this state, individuals show extreme sensitivity to sound or movement, as they feel constantly under threat (Gilbert, 2024). The tension in Jana's body, the look in her eyes, and Adam's spontaneous reaction to give her the earphones, show that trauma creates a constant vigilance system that drains mental energy.

Through this simple yet meaningful visualization, *The Sand Castle* presents a protective symbol that works in two layers. Literally as a soundproofing device, and psychologically as a shield from the threatening outside world. It becomes one of the powerful representations of how individuals survive through small yet significant strategies in the face of unfinished trauma.

## CONCLUSIONS

The symbolism of trauma in *The Sand Castle* reveals that children's traumatic experiences are expressed symbolically through visual elements that convey loss, hope, and helplessness. Within Saussure's semiotic framework, the relationship between the signifier and the signified constructs a system of meaning that reflects the characters' psychological conditions. At the same time, the imaginative world created by the child character serves as both a defense mechanism against emotional pressures and a means to articulate unspoken suffering.

The main contribution of this research lies in its integration of trauma theory and semiotics to uncover the inner dynamics of children in the context of conflict. This approach demonstrates that child trauma can be recognized not only through clinical symptoms but also through symbolic representations in visual media. Theoretically, this study extends trauma scholarship by positioning children's imaginative narratives as a valid articulation of hidden experiences, while practically it opens new pathways for further studies in media, psychology, and visual language to understand childhood trauma.

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### Data Availability Statement:

- Data derived from public domain resources (movie + literatur).

- Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in the research.

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