

Metaphysics of American Cultural Landscape and Mindscape in

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Abstract

This paper tries to highlight Don DeLillo's attempt to bring to surface the trauma Americans went through after the event of 9/11 by employing the rhetorical device of Ekphrasis. Just when America revelled in its digital revolution a group of men aboard in one of the American planes hit the towers on the morning of the ninth of November 2001. A vast opus of works has piled up in response to the event. DeLillo's novel as a novel on 9/11 is an account of his reflections on terror, media, as well as the role he assigns to artists in a world which is absolutely depended on the constructed stories by the media. This paper also explores DeLillo's attempt to understand and to show why a catastrophe like 9/11 befell seemingly invincible America. The novel, apart from being an illustrative work of aesthetic acumen, is also a DeLillo's deliberation on what America did to incite such a catastrophe. DeLillo seems to recognize the dilemma of an American fiction writer to respond critically to such a catastrophe while maintaining an unbiased and objective approach. He believes that a writer has a moral responsibility while understanding such an event. He seems to recommend that these acts of terrorism are a way of resistance against the pervasive cultural and political influence of the west over rest of the world, the Middle East, particularly.

Keywords:American, Revolution, Landscape, Mindscape, Terrorism, Cultural

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Don DeLillo is the most influential twentieth century American novelist. His postmodernist novels depict the anomie of an America fondled by material excess and dazed by empty mass culture and politics. He has taken the enduring power of literature coupled with the explosion of new media technologies and his avant-garde art producing an oeuvre of literature that projects issue of global terrorism, rampant consumerism, environmental catastrophes, and covers subjects as diverse as nuclear war, politics, economics, sports, Cold War, the advent of digital age, death, power of violence, influence of mass media on the society, expansion of US military and economic power etc that have collectively transformed the production of fiction. Contemporary American fiction enjoys a prominent place in the literary world today. Over the years, American fiction as a genre has gradually progressed from the periphery to the centre, making itself as the most popular and most critically acclaimed genre in the contemporary literary world. It reflects America's distinctive cultural and political life and the metamorphosis of its specific concepts like American Exceptionalism and American Dream. Throughout its history, American fiction has perpetually reinvented itself with the changing political, social, and cultural factors.

The terror attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center on the 11th of September, 2001 shook up the entire world, particularly America. People were mourning their lost ones but simultaneously trying to figure out why and what had exactly happened. While they struggled with the problem of how to respond to the most tragic event they had ever seen and experienced, the artists, writers, and filmmakers took the responsibility of portraying the violent event upon themselves through their works. Don DeLillo is one of the authors who attempted to make sense of this jigsaw puzzle thrown by the attacks right in the face of American civilization. DeLillo's essay, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on

Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September” written for *Harper’s Magazine* in December 2001 and his fourteenth novel, *Falling Man*, written in 2007, are his responses towards the event of 9/11. Before writing *Falling Man*, DeLillo wrote “In the Ruins” as a “counter narrative” making it his first literary response towards the attacks in which he asserts that the world narrative belongs to the terrorists. DeLillo, in the essay, interrogates the role of literature in puncturing the metanarratives and, therefore, providing the alternative viewpoint.

DeLillo believes that the space once occupied by the novelists has been usurped by the terrorists. The terrorists have created an environment in which a writer has lost his/her power. His significant works express his opinion that terrorism holds the power to shape popular beliefs in the current age of terror. As such, DeLillo sets up the task for serious writers to snatch the control of narrativity back from them since literary representation has the power to challenge the inclinations of grandnarrative.

The novel, *Falling Man*, is narrated by an omniscient narrator in the third person. DeLillo, as a contemporary avant-garde, observes that the real is now unreal or too real to be portrayed by the conventional straightforward realist narrative. Hence, the narrative of the novel jumps back and forth unmethodically, introducing unnamed characters, which makes it hard for the readers to recognize as to who is speaking, being spoken to or talked about. The conversations between the characters in the novel are abstract and oblique, sometimes repetitive which reflect the atmosphere of shock, confusion, and frustration, post 9/11. Short and broken sentences in the novel manifest the atmosphere of chaos and loss of understanding.

The novel is divided into three parts: Bill Lawton, Ernst Hechinger, and David Janiak. In each section of the novel the reader’s knowledge about the identities of the characters is deferred. In “Falling Man: Performing Fiction,” Joseph M. Conte associates this deferment of

recognition with the inability of Americans to comprehend the sequence of cause and effect of 9/11. First, develops the shock of the attack “during which we ask what is happening to us,” then “there is the revelation of a plot that has been devised by perpetrators unknown to us and whom we are only now, and only too late, coming to identify” (569). Each part ends with a short narrative from the perspective of one of the fictional hijackers, called Hammad. He starts his early days in Germany under the leadership of real terrorist, Mohammad Atta, and later in Florida with other fellow terrorists, and spends his final moments aboard the plane that crashes in the North Tower. The novel also traverses through the lives of the members of a dysfunctional family; Keith Neudecker, his wife Lianne, and their only son, Justin, and their close association’s right from the fall of the towers, through the harrowing aftermath of 9/11, to the first Iraq war protest of 2004. Their journey is presented to the readers in a non-linear manner with fragmented plot that represents the chaos of the days, post- 9/11. The plot of the novel and its repeated visual turns oblige a slowed-down reading process as assessed by Marie-Christine Leps. In “*Falling Man*: Performing Fiction,” she says, “Reading *Falling Man* (2007) is a halting process: it begins and ends in the midst of destruction and chaos, with someone walking away from it and into it at the same time” (184). Since the closing moments of the novel are synchronous with its opening lines, in the end the reader finds himself/herself taken back to the time when the planes were hijacked and then crashed into the towers. Thus, the author, in the novel, documents the impact of 9/11 in various flashbacks and digressions in the form of narratives of memory that outline the story of the novel. By doing so, DeLillo designs a method whereby he can re-examine the motives of the terrorists and the experience of the terrorists. The heading back of the end to its beginning mimics the incessant repetition of the fall of the towers telecast on television.

Falling Man begins with the survivor, Keith Neudecker walking in a condition of near-noctambulism through “rubble and mud” (3), covered in blood and ash, among people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads and handkerchief to their mouths. DeLillo presents the visuals of human suffering against the backdrop of twisted metal of the collapsing structures of the World Trade Center. The chaos around Keith prevents him from understanding and responding to the event that instant. He is shown walking slowly while other survivors are running frantically, covering their faces.

The closing of the novel is as harrowing and provoking as the beginning. In the closing chapters the writer portrays a moving picture of the attack - from the terrorists’ sitting in the plane with their apprehension to the havoc the attack would cause. As soon as the plane hits the North Tower Keith jolts out of his chair and rams straight into the wall. The floor on which he has been standing begins to shake and slide making him lose his balance. Crawling along the floor he sees the ceiling beginning to roar and ripple. He covers his head with his arms. The construction of the Twin Towers was completed in 1973 which according to Joseph M. Conte, “Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror,” was an “era of the prefix “super” “from the supermarket to the supersonic, they served as a manifestation of America’s ambitions as a superpower” (562). The construction of the twin towers marked the beginning of supremacy and power of American capitalism over the entire world.

The twin towers were not just the tallest buildings in the USA, but represented the invincibility of American nation and left an indelible imprint on the American cultural landscape and mindscape. Examining the cultural narrative of terrorism apropos of the concept of the place as reinforcing personal and cultural identity, in the face of dissolving beliefs, the narrative of a place is meant to establish home as constitutive of the self. He claimed that 9/11 was an attempt to disintegrate the place of identity of Americans as the

world's cosmopolis (192). As noted by George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant*, the fall of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were closely tied up with their "identities and with a vast amount of what we took for granted about our everyday life ... it became a symbol of America" (52). In the absence of the towers, which Americans revered, they felt a deep void. The void created by the destruction of the towers was recorded on an individual level for the Americans which Neil Leach perceived as a sign of damage to the self. In "Topophilia/Topophobia: The Role of the Environment in the Formation of Identity" he writes, "Human beings can equate themselves with buildings and identify with them. And once a sense of identity has been forged against a backdrop of a certain architectural environment, any damage to that environment will be read as damage to the self" (web).

The unexpected and sudden attack on the World Trade Center shook the very bedrock on which the identity of the Americans rested and instead induced paranoia and collective trauma into them. The author depicts how the event of 9/11 has a colossal and decimating effect on the fictional characters. Keith's close call with his death suddenly neutralizes and ossifies his individual self and he becomes fused with the surrounding. The obscurity shrouding the nature of the novel's narrative is intricate by the introduction of a second "him" (5) as the protagonist recognizes the fall of the North Tower, through his bewildered stream of consciousness. It hints at two different subjects - the protagonist and the personified North Tower.

DeLillo depicts Keith's life no different from rest of the regular American crowd: a Trade Center. The dominance of cybercapitalism, wave of multinational companies, and incomprehensible speed of the internet fashioned the global consciousness, particularly America's in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The influence of these significant changes in the American society has prompted a life for Americans that is spent

predominantly in the “glow of cyber capitalism” (*In the Ruins* 1). However, witnessing the momentous damage by 9/11 so closely, Keith now recognizes that the glow of cybercapitalism is not the zenith of human existence. He never resumes his professional life and instead joins World Poker Tournament, taking huge risks. This suggests that his job and career was never important to him and he had only been trying to fit within the frame of social structures. It is from the conversation between him and another survivor, Florence Givens, whom he eventually starts seeing, the reader learns about his enrolment in an acting school before he joins law school, simply because he has nothing to do. Only in the aftermath of 9/11 he realizes what he has always wanted.

The trauma of 9/11 fortifies a tendency which has always been there in Keith right from the beginning, though latently. His decision to return to his wife and son, soon after the attacks indicates his scepticism towards cybercapitalism. 9/11 seems to have wrought him into a new person as he tries to be a better husband and good father. When he listens to his wife talk about serious and traumatic issues like 9/11 or her father's suicide, when they discuss about the neighbour who disturbs Lianne with her Middle Eastern music, or about the siblings who talk about Bill Lawton or when he picks and drops Justin to school, helps him in his homework and plays with him in the park, Lianne claims that she saw a man she'd never known before. There, however, is an entrenched traumatic experience which he is dealing with simultaneously and which consequently brings him closer to Florence Givens, another survivor, who worked in a corporation in the North Tower. In reviewing Keith's involvement with Florence Givens, his decision of taking reckless bets at the poker games in Las Vegas, and his ultimate failure to form a steady bond with his family, many critics, comments Conte, have displayed their annoyance; since, according to them, “DeLillo doesn't transform Keith's

sufferings into his redemption” (577). In “Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror,” Conte observes that such acts of Keith manifest his irrevocable traumatic suffering.

Keith’s search for therapeutic relief comes to him by indulging in two activities his communication with Florence Givens and playing poker. Since both of them, Keith and Florence, share same post-traumatic wavelength, it creates affinity and a short time affair between them. But, as soon as he feels emotionally involved in the relationship he turns his back on Florence. As the novel proceeds towards its end the reader learns that Keith has even witnessed the death of his very close friend, Rumsey, which has left an indelible mark on Keith’s otherwise callous personality. The account of how Keith witnesses the death of his friend, amid the rumble and chaos of the unannounced tragedy, is quite agonizing and distressing. Keith somehow reaches Rumsey’s office and sees him pathetically hurt in his chair. He sees his face pressed into his shoulder. He cannot recognize him, but starts talking to him.

DeLillo, as an aesthetically accomplished novelist has used maximum of techniques available in his arsenal to capture the post-traumatic mindscape of New Yorker be it Keith, Lianne or Florence. Similarly, in order to bring to the surface, the effect of the attacks on the survivors as well as the perspective of the terrorists involved in 9/11, the novel is forged forward by an omniscient narrator in the third person. Such a narration, in which the narrator himself or herself does not take part in the plot, is called as heterodiegetic narration. Nonetheless, the presence of omniscient narrator in a novel bears the possibility of adopting an authoritarian tone. This possibility, however, is dissolved by DeLillo by making sure that the control shifts from the narrator to the character. With the use of free indirect speech or sometimes interior monologue, the narrator effortlessly shifts attention to and from various

characters. This allows the inclusion of multiple perspectives and spaces thus breaking the scope of totalizing or homogenizing narratives.

The quest for hope and stability is not easy for a sensitive, vulnerable, and thoughtful woman like Lianne Glenn at all. Right from her teens, she has had a disturbing life. That her father commits suicide when Lianne is 22 years old leaves an indelible impression on her. She has a strained relationship with her mother, Nina Bartos, who keeps lecturing her about God and His ways. All these incidents in her life make her quite vulnerable and decentred. Moreover, a broken marriage further extracts her remaining beliefs. 9/11 is just another nail in the coffin of her belief system. She is shown fighting with herself to relive to Catholicism on account of the beliefs induced by her mother's sceptic stance on religion, her rendezvous with Kierkegaard during her college days, and her meeting with the writing group of the Alzheimer's patients, and her memories of her father as a catholic in the backdrop of 9/11 shape her quest for spirituality. DeLillo's fiction, through these characters, exposes the America's quest of America's of spirituality and other supportive moorings morality in post-9/11 America.

This paper can be safely concluded by saying that DeLillo has made a nearly successful aesthetic attempt of capturing the psychological and spiritual jolt that Americans suffered in the wake of 9/11. He owns the writers' responsibility to come to the center stage and design the narrative of life and politics, something that the terrorists have almost completely usurped. DeLillo uses the motif of "falling man" to send across the message, loud and clear, that art is the only square response to the events of the magnitude like 9/11. Telling the 'event' as well as its ramifications from multiple narrative perspectives, the novelist has appropriated the responses of common Americans in the face of 9/11 and transformed them into seemingly first-hand experience. The centre have been viewed a severe attack on

America's global economic hegemony, American Exceptionalism, the country as a super power and her supposed unique place in the world. DeLillo also succeeds, in the character of Keith, in pointing out the ennui that the American materialistic pursuits have created in the lives of her people. The glow of cyber-capitalism¹¹ has severed the human's touch with the conscious living and consequently shattered the familial ties. However, DeLillo's didacticism can be read in suggesting that America should wake up from the slumber of being the invulnerable. She must shun her obsession with futurism, revisit the past and reconsider its socio-economic as well as global position, in order to avoid such events like 9/11. The phenomenon of globalization must be viewed as a level playing field for all the stake holders, and dissolve the boundaries between the East and the West.

Be the narrative perspective of Americans like Keith and Lianne or that of the hijacker, Hammad, DeLillo has laid bare the very elemental human characteristics and established that the differences are created by politics, wrong religious indoctrinations and division between first, second and third world. It is DeLillo's creative acumen that gets reflected in the narrative experimentation that he conducts in the novel. He wields the tool of language with such ingenuity that enables him to uncover the terrorized mindscape of the victims of 9/11 and weave it with the global political and economic issues.

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