

Exploration of Traumatic Tenets in 9/11 Novels

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Abstract

*The terrorist incidents of September 11, 2001 transformed global political dialogue, cultural remembrance, and modern literature. In reaction, a genre of literature termed “9/11 novels” surfaced, examining trauma, grief, identity, nationalism, and the changes in personal and societal life following the attacks. This study analyzes significant themes, storytelling methods, and portrayal difficulties present in chosen 9/11 novels—including Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The study additionally examines how these works address trauma, memory, intercultural conflict, and evolving concepts of home, belonging, and security. Results indicate that 9/11 literature significantly influences public perceptions of the incident and its consequences, providing creative avenues for mourning, discussion, and cultural analysis. The literature that arose following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks showcases intricate emotional, political, and cultural reactions. Referred to as 9/11 fiction or post-9/11 literature, these creations seek to comprehend an event that was shocking, traumatic, and of global significance. Their examination encompasses topics of trauma, identity, national memory, and the moral considerations of representation.*

Keywords: 9/11 Fiction, Trauma, Geopolitics, Social Conflict, American Literature

Introduction

The assaults on September 11, 2001, are considered some of the most distressing occurrences of the twenty-first century. The demolition of the World Trade Center and the loss of almost 3,000 lives profoundly impacted American identity and international geopolitics. Literature, particularly fiction, emerged as a key instrument for writers to explore the emotional and cultural repercussions of the attacks. Novels composed in the wake—frequently labeled as “9/11 novels”—explore the conflicts between trauma and recollection, personal anguish and communal mourning, anxiety and endurance. Researchers like Versluys (2009) and Keniston & Quinn (2008) contend that 9/11 literature serves as a type of cultural therapy, assisting communities in dealing with trauma while thoughtfully addressing themes like Islamophobia, nationalism, and global strife. This study examines

the primary literary reactions to 9/11, emphasizing chosen novels that showcase various narrative techniques and ideological viewpoints. The terrorist incidents on September 11, 2001 significantly influenced modern American and international literature. Books addressing 9/11—frequently referred to as 9/11 fiction, post-9/11 literature, or Ground Zero fiction—examine personal trauma, national identity, memory, sorrow, and the political ramifications of global terrorism. These accounts strive to depict an occurrence that was momentary but had a worldwide impact.

Literature Review

Many 9/11 novels examine psychological trauma via disjointed storytelling and a non-sequential narrative. For example, Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* features a young narrator to illustrate the emotional consequences of a parent's death, representing the delicacy of memory and the challenge of reassembling understanding. LaCapra (2004) observes that trauma fiction frequently depends on repetition, silence, and meta-fictional strategies to imitate the traumatic experience. Fiction after 9/11 also highlights the growing distrust of Muslim and South Asian communities. Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* provides an alternative narrative by depicting 9/11 through the eyes of a Pakistani individual whose life is affected by American bias. Puar (2007) examines how 9/11 heightened cultural monitoring and racial profiling, themes reflected in modern literature.

Depicting 9/11 raises both aesthetic and ethical dilemmas. Critics contend that the scale of the event threatens to lower fiction to mere sentimentality or spectacle. DeLillo's *Falling Man* seeks to counter this by emphasizing the inner experiences of survivors instead of depicting the event itself. Gray (2011) mentions that novels about 9/11 typically find a balance between realism and symbolic imagery to honor the event's sensitivity. Foer's book has received significant acclaim for its creative storytelling form and emotional richness. Critics emphasize its combination of visual components—photos, flipbook-like images, and empty pages—aiming to convey the disarray of trauma following 9/11. Researchers contend that Oskar's youthful voice both alleviates and amplifies the tragedy, enabling readers to navigate sorrow through naivety and creativity. Nonetheless, certain critics argue that excessive sentimentality may lead to the aestheticization of trauma.

Gray (2009) contends that Foer's experimental approach provides a distinctive way to express collective grief, although it occasionally finds it challenging to reconcile emotional involvement with historical awareness. In general, the novel continues to be among the most often analyzed pieces of post-9/11 literature. Critics view *Falling Man* as a pivotal 9/11 novel due to its psychological authenticity and philosophical richness. DeLillo emphasizes the prolonged impact of the event on memory, identity, and relationships rather

than the event itself. Critics highlight the book's stark style, disjointed format, and persistent motifs of trauma. Duvall (2012) mentions that the novel reflects the "persistent shock" of the attacks through characters that are unable to resume normal life. Certain critics, however, consider DeLillo's writing excessively impersonal, claiming that the emotional detachment could estrange readers. Even with varied reactions, the book is lauded for avoiding exaggerated portrayals of 9/11.

Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has received significant praise for presenting a non-Western viewpoint on 9/11. Critics commend its singular narrative style, fostering both closeness and uncertainty. The minimalist framework prompts readers to challenge their beliefs and examine post-9/11 Islamophobia. Boehmer and Morton (2009) contend that the novel challenges American-centric narratives by portraying a Pakistani protagonist struggling with issues of identity, belonging, and systemic mistrust. Numerous critics interpret the novel as a commentary on global power imbalances following 9/11. Some critics, however, perceive the ending as deliberately unclear, which others see as strengthening stereotypes via ambiguity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analysis of texts. Three significant 9/11 novels were chosen for their critical acclaim, thematic depth, and portrayal of varied perspectives in Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The research examines narrative framework, thematic issues, cultural depiction, and literary methods. Secondary academic sources were examined to bolster thematic analysis.

This research employs a qualitative literary approach, concentrating on the textual examination of chosen 9/11 novels. The goal is to analyze how authors depict trauma, identity, politics, and cultural clashes following the attacks. The design focuses on detailed reading, thematic categorization, analytical interpretation, and comparative examination. This design is suitable because literary significance arises through interpretation instead of quantification. To choose the texts, the research employed purposive sampling, selecting novels that critics widely acknowledge as important examples of post-9/11 literature. Selections were made according to their relevance to 9/11 topics, variety of viewpoints (both American and international), critical acclaim, and the availability of academic discussion. The research has utilized trauma theory as its theoretical framework. The research has been carried out with reference to Caruth, LaCapra, and various other trauma theorists.

Discussion

Foer and DeLillo illustrate trauma via fractured narrative structures. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Oskar's emotional path illustrates unprocessed sorrow. *Falling Man* depicts survivors whose sense of self crumbles beneath the burden of trauma. Both books employ symbolism, including the "falling man" motif, to signify shared trauma and fragility. Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* redirects attention from American suffering to worldwide identity conflicts. Changez's encounters highlight the societal frictions and biases that emerged after 9/11. The book questions Western stories and emphasizes the mutual relationship between fear and misunderstanding. 9/11 fiction often reflects on the geopolitical consequences—conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the emergence of security-focused states, and the evolution of international relations. These components are subtly present in *Falling Man* and overtly in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

This variety of methods enhances 9/11 literature and avoids simplistic interpretations. DeLillo's *Falling Man* illustrates this fragmentation via a nonlinear framework, sudden flashbacks, and an emphasis on physical trauma. The characters find it difficult to express the trauma, reflecting Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma frequently defies narrative clarity. Likewise, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* depicts trauma via the child narrator, Oskar Schell, whose sorrow is conveyed through images, typographic innovation, and missing voices. The disjointed storyline serves as a symbol of the broken national consciousness. Novels about 9/11 frequently examine the strict identity limits that arose following the attacks. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* specifically confronts Western beliefs regarding terrorism and the identity of Muslims. The dramatic monologue structure of the novel unsettles the reader's perception of truth, compelling them to face their own prejudices. Updike's *Terrorist* further investigates Muslim identity but does so with greater controversy, as it examines the mental processes of radicalization. Through these narratives, 9/11 fiction examines stereotypes, Islamophobia, and the cultural conflicts heightened by the attacks.

A persistent query in 9/11 fiction is whether the event can truly be represented effectively. Critics like Richard Gray contend that novelists writing shortly after 9/11 found it difficult to develop a language that could effectively convey the event. This conflict is evident in novels that emphasize silence, emptiness, and disjointed memories. In *Falling Man*, memory is unreliable and frequently intrusive. Characters undergo flashbacks that mimic the cyclical aspect of trauma. The theme of the "falling body" transforms into an intangible image that lingers throughout the text. Foer's book employs visual narration to address the constraints of memory—empty pages, inverted images, and flip-book animations serve as efforts to depict the indescribable. Numerous 9/11 novels examine how

people reconstruct their lives following disaster. Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* centers on those who endure and those who help, seeking closeness and meaning in the midst of sorrow. The book perceives healing as a process that is both individual and collective.

Similarly, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* illustrates recovery through narratives, bonds between generations, and the symbolic quest for a lock that fits Oskar's key. The process of searching serves as a symbol for emotional healing. 9/11 novels act as essential cultural records that interpret, challenge, and humanize the experiences related to the attacks. Utilizing diverse narrative techniques and thematic issues, these pieces investigate loss, selfhood, cultural clashes, and the reconfiguration of international relations. They not only safeguard memory but also encourage conversation across cultural and ideological differences. With the ongoing evolution of global conflicts and views on "terrorism," 9/11 fiction remains an important area for exploring how societies create meaning in response to traumatic historical events.

The struggle to articulate the trauma of the experience and a pressing desire to comprehend the significance of writing creates the representation crisis encountered by writers post-strikes. Keniston and Quinn argue that literary novels after 9/11 focus on 'what cannot be represented about 9/11' as much as on 'how we understand and depict 9/11' and its connection to shaping the rationale for the GWOT. This reflective approach could counteract how the emotionally charged aspects of the attacks may be exploited for ideological aims. The choice not to respond impulsively can serve as a form of defiance against the emotional influence of the situation. This does not imply that there exists a simple contrast between commercially successful novels and literary works; instead, fiction both challenged and upheld certain troubling elements of the cultural and political narratives following 9/11. Subsequent fictional works that intentionally address the terror attacks by reassessing the political backdrop to place the assaults within a broader narrative of the USA's interventionist actions overseas contested the prevailing interpretations of 9/11. These interpretations depend on portraying the victims of the attacks as perfect victims and viewing the terrorists as entirely evil figures that need to be eliminated.

Catherine Morley, in her analysis of post-9/11 narratives of loss and trauma in literature, 'highlights a pervasive sadness regarding the constraints of language as a means of communication or emotional expression'. She observes that fiction tends to 'highlight the visual' because 'the limits of literary realism have [been] changed'. Authors utilize literary devices to construct "an intensified form of realism to effectively reflect the truths of post-9/11 socio-cultural and personal environments." Novels centered around 9/11 depend on the domestic narrative to emphasize the emotional atmosphere of that era. Arin Keeble participates in the discussion regarding the domestic plot in 9/11 novels by analyzing the

relevant texts critically. Critics such as Pankaj Mishra contend that the domestic context removes the political aspects from terror attacks, while academics like Robert Marzec and John N. Duvall refute this by highlighting the domestic narrative's effectiveness in critiquing the postwar politics of the 1920s and 1930s, asserting it continues to be relevant after 9/11. It is also observed that authors should not be obligated to address political matters.

The 9/11 novel explores various geopolitical concerns, but torture appears to be relegated to the periphery of these narratives. The selected novels and films depict torture with more depth than numerous other texts usually linked to the genre. Examining beliefs and attitudes about torture within a mix of fictional and non-fictional works provides a powerful critique of the rationale behind torture by revealing how they emerge as influenced by the genre.

Torture represented a regrettable aspect of the GWOT, and this thesis examines the beliefs surrounding torture through the framework of revenge in culturally meaningful ways, emphasizing genre as needed. The study conducted in this context will undoubtedly broaden the boundaries of the 9/11 genre by advocating for the inclusion of these texts in the corpus.

Alex Adams has focused on depictions of torture in movies, television, and various literary works. In his book discussing the torture debate, he notes that the primary shortcoming of anti-torture narratives after 9/11 has been the inclination to overlook issues regarding the treatment of the culpable. This project aligns with Adams' belief that 'fiction can envision justice,' highlighting the fruitful possibilities of examining how guilt is portrayed in narratives concerning torture. The revenge narrative serves as an illustration of one of the most ancient forms of cultural conception of justice regarding how the guilty are treated. This is clear through the focus given to the idea of justice in the established domain of literary criticism, featuring significant scholarly works on Greek Tragedy, Jacobean, and Elizabethan literature, among others. Recent scholarly works, such as Kyle Wiggins's study on the modern American revenge narrative, are quite uncommon compared to the extensive scholarship dedicated to classical literature. Similarly, academic studies focused on post 9/11 literature, film, and television have occasionally mentioned the quest for revenge; however, a thorough examination focused on how emotions drive the need for revenge, rendering the justification for torture persuasive, is crucial for grasping the role of feelings in transforming the values that shape our ideas of justice and human rights.

This study focuses on the intricate connections between narrative, the principle of proportionality, and the handling of the guilty in speeches by Bush, pro-torture arguments by Sam Harris and Alan Dershowitz, the Torture Papers, as well as instances in mainstream

films and literary works that utilize elements of the revenge narrative. In contrast to Thomas and Herman, this thesis focuses not on the terrorist's motivations but rather on how the terrorist figure provides the context for generating the emotional urgency that allows justifications for highly violent actions to arise. The ideas of proportionality and the way satisfaction is built through repeated themes of revenge are essential for grasping how the characterization of the terrorist is employed to rationalize using extreme measures against adversaries in a visceral way. The selected texts and films for analysis suggest that this discussion extends beyond Muslim terrorists and the 9/11 attacks, highlighting authors whose identities are often ambiguous, occasionally by design. For instance, Percival Everett creates literature that deliberately challenges classifications such as African American fiction. Rushdie relocated from India to the UK and subsequently to the United States. His writing exhibits Universalist traits and often portrays culture as a fusion. In a comparable way, Aslam relocated from Pakistan to England, and his novel similarly idealizes mingling by using the metaphor of perfume. 9/11 fiction is deeply shaped by the traumatic impact of the September 11 attacks. Trauma—psychological, emotional, cultural, and national—is central to how novelists represent the event and its aftermath. Drawing on trauma theory (Caruth, LaCapra, Kaplan), these novels depict trauma not just as an event, but as an ongoing condition that disrupts memory, identity, time, and language itself.

Novels depicting the events of 9/11 often explore profound themes such as mourning, survivor's guilt, family disintegration, emotional numbness, and overwhelming fear. These narratives delve into the psychological aftermath of the tragedy, illustrating how individuals grapple with their loss and the haunting feelings of guilt associated with survival in the face of such calamity. The disintegration of familial bonds is frequently highlighted, as the trauma experienced alters relationships and disrupts the fabric of domestic life. Additionally, the pervasive sense of emotional numbness serves as a coping mechanism for characters, reflecting a broader societal response to the chaos and devastation that ensued. Ultimately, these works encapsulate the deep-seated fear that permeated everyday existence in the wake of the attacks, offering a poignant commentary on the lasting impact of loss and trauma within both personal and collective contexts.

Trauma significantly disrupts the normal functioning of memory, a phenomenon that is extensively examined in novels centered on the events of 9/11. Key elements of this exploration include the prevalence of flashbacks and intrusive memories, which serve as haunting reminders of the traumatic experience. Additionally, these narratives often feature disjointed timelines, reflecting the fragmented nature of recollection post-trauma. The repetition of traumatic scenes further emphasizes the inescapability of the past, while characters frequently grapple with the difficulty of narrating or verbalizing their

experiences. This complex interplay of memory and trauma underscores the profound impact such events have on individuals and their ability to construct coherent narratives of their lives.

In DeLillo's *Falling Man*, the protagonist Keith's survival of the Twin Towers catastrophe is marked by a profound psychological impact that manifests through fragmented recollections, involuntary flashbacks, and a fractured sense of time. These elements illustrate how trauma disrupts the coherence of memory and linearity of experience. Keith's memories are not only disjointed but also invasive, interrupting his present life with reminders of the past that he cannot fully process. This fragmentation reflects the broader disarray experienced by individuals and society in the aftermath of such a catastrophic event, where the boundaries between past and present blur, leaving a lingering sense of disorientation and emotional turmoil. Through these narrative techniques, DeLillo effectively captures the enduring and complex nature of trauma in the face of profound loss and existential uncertainty. This mirrors trauma theorists who argue that traumatic memory is non-sequential and often returns in fragments rather than coherent stories.

Conclusion

The literary reaction to the September 11 attacks has generated a varied collection of fiction that seeks to address trauma, identity, and global politics following a transformative event. Exploring 9/11 novels entails analyzing how authors depict the emotional, psychological, and cultural intricacies arising from the attacks. This reading consolidates principal interpretive issues from important works including *Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Terrorist* and *The Good Life*. A key element in 9/11 literature is the depiction of trauma. Numerous novels illustrate characters whose perception of reality is disrupted by the occurrence.

The examination of loss, grief, and emotional confusion in novels focusing on the events of 9/11 provides a deep understanding of the psychological consequences faced by individuals and societies. These stories frequently explore the complex aspects of mourning, depicting individuals who struggle with the abrupt loss of dear ones and the resulting turmoil that unsettles their existence. The emotional confusion illustrated in these pieces reveals not just individual heartbreaks but also a shared feeling of fragility and doubt that affected the community following the attacks. Writers employ these themes to explore the intricacies of grief in a world that has been permanently changed, illustrating how this trauma can influence identities and connections. The novels stand as proof of the lasting effects of loss, encouraging readers to explore the complex emotional terrains that emerge during times of deep tragedy.

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