

A Tale of Two Towers: Victims and Perpetrators in Don Delillo's *Falling Man* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

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"And then, on September 11, the world fractured."

(Barack Obama, Dreams from My Father)

Abstract

The article probes into the two different perspectives of the horrific 9/11 attacks. Every story has two sides, and the analysis of the two diverse novels- Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) will help to explore the ideas and misconceptions that rule us at a personal level which in turn contributes to our public outlook. Post the 9/11 attacks, there has been a dramatic change in the way the world views the Muslims, the "perpetrators", and Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* perfectly captures the transition of New York after the attacks. *Falling Man* on the other hand delves into the deep-rooted havoc that the attacks have caused in the life of the survivors. The divide between the East and the West has never been more pronounced, and the paper implores into the role of literature in our understanding of the human psyche and public affairs. The paper aims at understanding what incites terrorism and what motivates terrorists and is humanizing them the need of the hour?

Keywords: Terrorism, Post-9/11 reactions, Islam, War on Terror, Vulnerability, Oppression, Power, Multiculturalism

Introduction

In the 21st century where people hear of violent crimes every day, 9.11.2001 shook not only America but had a deep impact around all sections of the globe. Few events rival the attacks that happened on the fateful day of 9.11.2001. The terrorist attack caused such a wide impact because destructed not

just the two towers but also destructed several symbols. President George W. Bush had remarked at the United Nations General Assembly:

Time is passing. Yet, for the United States of America, there will be no forgetting September the 11th. We will remember every rescuer who died in honor. We will remember every family that lives in grief. We will remember the fire and ash, the last phone calls, the funerals of the children. (November 11, 2001)

Called the Pearl Harbor of our generation, the 4 coordinated terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. by Al-Qaeda caused the death of 3000 people and injured over 10,000. That was not all, for these attacks had a reverberating effect throughout the globe and changed the way people saw life. September 11 is indeed the day that never ends. The beautiful poem "110 Stories" by Sasha Taylor captures the anguish of the day, "110 stories fell on top of me today,/ I didn't think the pain would ever go away"

The 9/11 disaster has devastated more than just the 3000 Americans and their families who lost their life that day. Today we are still questioning who the victims are and who the perpetrators are. Aren't there two sides to every story? The horrific bombings of the Twin Towers had changed the way people looked at America and the way America looked at the world. Literature serves as a reminder to us that the world is a boiling pot of different cultures. No society is purely one thing and it is important to remember that not all Muslims are terrorists or fundamentalists just like not all Germans are Hitler's. In this monochromatic world of stereotypes what is needed is to understand the impact on human beings- not as "Americans" or "Muslims" but primarily as individuals, as humans.

The many 9/11 literary pieces like Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, John Updike's *Terrorist*, and *Windows On the World* by Frederic Beigbeder offer us varied perspectives on the attacks. 9/11 literature thus embodies the emotional and psychological burdens of a horrific experience. It is crucial that this genre must use its influence to collectively engage in useful dialogue to solve one of the world's most pressing problems.

Two prominent novels of the 9/11 genre are *Falling Man* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. These two novels give us two very diverse perspectives of the attacks and its aftermath. Since 9/11, there has been paranoia about danger coming from anywhere and any place, and De Lillo's *Falling Man* captures this anxiety and insecurity of a man who narrowly escaped the

9/11 disaster. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* on the other hand, is about the nature and magnitude of the dramatic change in how Muslims and Islam are viewed today in the post 9/11 world.

"Don" DeLillo (born November 20, 1936) is an American novelist and essayist. His works cover diverse subjects like nuclear war, television, sports, and global terrorism. Literary critic Harold Bloom named him as one of the four major American novelists of his time. For a writer concerned with subjects of war and global terrorism, DeLillo's 9/11 novel *Falling Man* has been one of the most influential texts of the 9/11 genre. The novel deals with psychological consequences and traumatic effects of the attacks on a few people. DeLillo's view of the post-9/11 encompasses the social, emotional, and political ideas that arguably constitute a new era. In his rendering of 9/11, DeLillo focuses on the American, or generally speaking the hegemonic side of the event.

Falling Man by De Lillo published six years after the attack gives us an intimate account of the post 9/11 scenario in the life of Keith. De Lillio writes, "Everything now is measure by after". (DeLillo 2007, 138)

Like DeLillo's nephew, the protagonist also narrowly escapes death and the novel charts his psychological trauma in the aftermath of these events. The protagonist Keith Neudecker is a 39 year old lawyer who worked at the World Trade Center. The novel revolves around Keith and Lianne who had split up but get back together after the 9/11 attack. After having escaped from the burning towers, Keith feels the need to belong somewhere and first turns to his family. The novel depicts their attempts to come to terms with the unthinkable events of 9/11. After these attacks, the rootless characters try to find something solid in a falling world, and some meaning in a meaningless world.

The protagonist of the novel, Keith has been part of the attacks and as a result is deeply disturbed. In the beginning of the novel, Keith remarks:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads. They had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths. They had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him. They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars. The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now. (DeLillo 2007, 3)

As with Sartre's play *The Flies*, the New Yorkers find themselves in an environment "where the dead are more alive than the living". The characters all seem lost and unaware and the post 9/11 world seems to be something new. In the words of Keith, "That's another world, the one that makes sense". (DeLillo 2007, 40)

The Twin Tower disaster has a profound and grave effect on Keith, and we can only imagine what it was like to be stuck in those towers for all the other Keith's who were stuck in the smoke and ash. The novel gives us many little details of the event like the instance of water was being passed around, the stink in the air, the second towers collapsing among other things.

Keith and his wife, Lianne, had been separated before the crash. Even though Keith's apartment was close to the towers, Keith reaches his ex-wife's house with shards of glass in his face and seems lost till Lianne takes him in. Lianne remarks to her mother Nina:

It was not possible, up from the dead; there he was in the doorway. It's so lucky Justin was here with you. Because it would have been awful for him to see his father like that. Like gray soot head to toe, I don't know, like smoke, standing there, with blood on his face and clothes. (DeLillo 2007, 4)

While the attacks unify Keith and Lianne's, it causes problems between Nina and her long-time lover Martin. They argue about the reasons for the attacks. Martin believes the reason is simple. He remarks:

One side has the capital, the labor, the technology, the armies, the agencies, the cities, the laws, the police, and the prisons. The other side has a few men willing to die. (DeLillo 2007, 46)

Nina on the other hand believes:

....it's not the history of Western interference that pulls down these societies. It's their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world, of choice, of necessity. They haven't advanced because they haven't wanted to or tried to. (DeLillo 2007, 46)

Throughout the novel, we see that Martin is very concerned with how the events have changed the world from a social and political point of view. At one point, he says:

We're all sick of America and Americans. The subject nauseates us. [...] For all the careless power of this country, let me say this, for all the danger it makes in the world, America is going to become irrelevant. [...] Soon the day is coming when nobody has to think about America except for the danger it brings. It is losing the center. It becomes the center of its own shit. This is the only center it occupies. (DeLillo 2007, 46)

This makes us ponder over the responsibility and role of America as a super power and how the stability of the West shifted in a few minutes. The two symbols of power came crashing down, and with it was the sense of security that a strong and mighty nation is untouchable. Even a decade later, "We are not as safe as we thought" is the common sentiment among all.

What truly sets this novel apart and makes us rethink the events of 9/11 is DeLillo's terrorist Hammad. *Falling Man* incorporates the perspective of a terrorist named Hammad, who is present on one of the planes. His narrative recounts his training days and eventually brings us back to the day of the attacks. DeLillo tells the readers, "They read the sword verses of the Koran ... [and were] determined to become one mind". (DeLillo 2007, 83)

DeLillo's Hammad is a young and frustrated immigrant who is quite lost. The author gives the terrorist humane qualities and offers us the unusual perspective as to what might go in the mind of an individual committing such a ghastly act. Hammad is caught between patriotism and his own logical reasoning that tells him killing innocent people cannot be right. He questions and scorns at some of the attitudes and opinions of his companions. On the one hand, he dreams of having his family with a girl named Leyla, and on the other hand is mesmerized and sucked into the strong network of patriotic terrorists. He is deeply troubled at the prospect of killing so many innocent people. Hammad questions his friend Amir about the others who will die. Hammad also wonders of the real meaning of jihad for Islam condemns those who commit suicide. He remarks, "Never mind the man who takes his own life in this situation. What about the lives of others he takes with him?" (DeLillo 2007, 176)

Suicide or not, Jihad or not, "Falling Man" by DeLillo forces readers to rethink the grave impact of the attacks on the hundreds in the towers and what actually caused it and what followed. *Falling Man* furthers our comprehension of the 9/11 attacks and offers us a dual perspective of the victims, Keith and his family, and of the terrorists Hammad and his friends. What motivates terrorists to destroy innocent lives? Is it easy for them to leave behind everything? Are they all monsters? Were they born monsters? The questions are complex and the answers unfathomable. The world has always been an intricate web of power and domination and it is for us to understand that world domination is not the solution. As Versluys remarks, "DeLillo indicates that September 11 can only be understood geopolitically as the clash of two opposing frames of reference, two worlds on a collision course" (Versluys, 44). He calls this a "geopolitical stalemate" where the terrorist, "...summarizes the defining difference between East and West". (Versluys, 45)

Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* on the other hand, challenges the attitude and reaction of the readers. Written as a dramatic monologue, it is a half story, a conversation that the forces us to reevaluate the ideas and misconceptions that rule our lives at both the personal level and public level.

Mohsin Hamid (born January 01, 1971) is a Pakistani author best known for his bold novels. Michiko Kakutanin agrees that he is one of his generation's most inventive and gifted writers.

The novel takes place over the course of one day, where the only speaker is Changez who also reveals the thoughts of the American listener seated in front of him in a Lahore restaurant. He begins his story by stating he is a lover of America and goes on to reveal how his life changed in the aftermath of the attacks. His life is completely fractured in ways he never imagined possible. The novel gives us a clear picture of America before and after the attacks. In the words of the author himself, "The form of the novel....allowed me to mirror the mutual suspicion with which America and Pakistan (or the Muslim world) looks at one another."

The protagonist of his novel like the author himself is from Pakistan who graduates from Princeton. Like the author, the protagonist also works in investment banking in New York before he returns to Pakistan. Hamid's unique perspective as a writer from Pakistan gives us a chance to see the after effects of 9/11 from another perspective and helps us understand how it affected the others, the Non-Americans and how it affected especially those who looked like Muslims. In an interview with EW book critic Jennifer Reese, Mohsin remarks:

I was 30 when 9/11 happened and I had lived exactly 15 years of life in America, so I was half American. I was a full-fledged New Yorker ... I hoped people I cared about weren't dead, and then I thought: My whole world is about to change.

Changez feels betrayed by America in the aftermath of 9/11. Manhattan, which always had seemed welcoming, is no longer the same. Reluctant Fundamentalist breaks the stereotypes that promote a biased view against the 'Others'. The Muslim world is often looked at as the hub of terrorism. Despite Changez's controversial reaction to the attacks, he tries his best to continue his career at Underwood Samson with little success. He soon realizes that things have changed for him dramatically after the events. Even for him like DeLillo's Keith, "Everything is now measured by after". (DeLillo 2007, 138)

When Changez is at work, he witnesses the events on television. As many other people watching it on TV, he first considers them to be fiction but when he realizes it is real he is surprised by his reaction. At first he feels sorry for victims but then cannot help but smile. Changez recalls:

I stared as one- and then the other- of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased ... but I am no sociopath; I am not indifferent to the suffering of others. When I hear of an acquaintance who has been diagnosed with a serious illness, I feel - almost without fail - a sympathetic pain, a twinge in my kidneys strong enough to elicit a wince...So when I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity. (Hamid 2008, 83)

He further tells the American listener:

But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the victims of the attack- death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have build up relationships over multiple episodes- no, I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees.(Hamid 2008, 83)

The world is no longer the same place for him. He is stopped at the airport, searched thoroughly and kept away from his colleagues. Suddenly, his status has changed despite his education at prestigious university and his job at a renowned company. The change is well represented by his conversation with an officer after Changez's arrives at the New York airport:

What is the purpose of your trip to the United States? she [the officer] asked me. —I live here, I replied. That is not what I asked you, sir, she said. (Hamid 2008, 86)

In the words of Soumya Bhattacharya writing for The Sydney Morning Herald:

Hamid shows us the post-September 11 world from another angle. In doing so he offers up a mirror to the complex business of East-West encounters in these troubled times. (April 14, 2007)

The Reluctant Fundamentalist manages to reflect on the post-9/11 chaotic world chaos in a fresh and powerful way. It switches the roles and gives the most dominant voice to the Americanized Muslim protagonist. Alastair Sooke in The Daily Telegraph (April 18, 2007) rightly maintains that the novel: "is quite a relevant book...It portrays the cancerous suspicions between the East and the West".

Hamid explains that in many different sections of the globe, resentment towards America is evident. The fact that superpower was humiliated and unstable gave satisfaction to many. This controversial remark by Changez makes the readers rethink about the causes of the attacks. Haruo Shirane in her work "The Global Phenomenon of 'Humanizing' Terrorism" rightly notes:

It is not enough to condemn and fight terrorism; we must understand its causes. One reason that we failed to anticipate the events of 11 September is our persistent ignorance of major non-Western cultures and our government policies based on such ignorance.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist offers a new and innovative framework through which post-9/11 Eastern and Western relationships and prejudices can be re-examined. Reluctant Fundamentalist breaks the stereotypes and misconceptions that promote prejudiced and biased view against the people who are considered as 'Others'. The Muslim world is looked at as the hub of terrorism. The already existing gulf was widened by this incident. It reinforced the existing view that the Occident is civilized whereas the Orient is not.

It is a fact that the number of attacks on Muslims or people who supposedly looked like Muslims grew significantly after the events and continues to a certain extent even today. After the 9/11 attacks, Changez begins to feel more resentment towards America. The Pakistani side within him starts to emerge. He feels to be looked down upon and his pride is hurt. He is further disturbed by the War on Terror. The American fantasy begins to crumble for Changez and he sees the place in a different light. He remarks:

I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back. Living in New York was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War; I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in technicolor but in grainy black and white. What your fellow countrymen longed for was unclear to me – a time of unquestioned dominance? Of safety? Of moral certainty? I did not know – but that they were scrambling to don the costumes of another era was apparent. I felt treacherous for wondering whether that era was fictitious, and whether – if it could indeed be animated – it contained a part written for someone like me. (Hamid 2008, 131)

He ponders over the reasons for the attacks and holds America equally responsible for the attacks. He tells the American:

As a society, you [America] were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interest not only the rest of humanity, but also in your own. (Hamid 2008, 190)

The reader wonders if the protagonist is really reluctant. The term "reluctant" is strangely juxtaposed with the word fundamentalist. When we use fundamentalist, we refer to a one-eyed and passionate believer, someone who has strong and extreme beliefs that they are fully committed to and will not turn away from. The fundamentalist wants to bring down a great deal more than buildings. They are tyrants, not Muslims. According to the Oxford Dictionary, fundamentalism is a strict maintenance of ancient fundamental doctrines of a religion or ideology.

This definition of a fundamentalist then is anything but reluctant. Changez, although nominally a Muslim, shows his listener and to the readers that he is not a hard-core Islamist at all. We would expect a fundamentalist Muslim to be strict, intolerant even, about alcohol, women, and homosexuality. Changez, however, makes references to drinking, believed that women should be

educated and have rights to equal economic opportunity. Changez is certainly not a religious fundamentalist and does not give us any reason to think that he is.

A similar identity crisis is evident in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*, where we find characters caught between two extremes of liberalism and religious fundamentalism. Hamid exposes the fact that even the American society like Asia is not free from promoting hatred and intolerance. The way the attacks were handled has caused many new problems between people not only in America but throughout the globe. Prior to the attacks, not many people gave serious thought to East or West, or what part of the world their friends and colleagues belonged to, but now things have certainly changed for mistrust is inevitable.

We live in a complicated society where we are compelled to "belong". On one hand we have Bush who remarked "You are with us, or against us", and on the other hand, we have Jihadists who believe that those Muslims who don't support Jihad are not true Muslims. So what choices does it leave for someone like Changez and thousand other like him? Isn't it time we are treated as human beings first, irrespective of our caste, class, religion or community. It is indeed paradoxical that on the one hand, we live in a seemingly borderless world where culture, economy, politics do not matter and on the other hand, since the attacks we witness a wave of xenophobia among the masses, and megalomania among the leaders. This has even led to closed borders and mistrust of the "other"

DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* present us with two varied experiences of an American and a Non-American, more specifically a Muslim in the post 9/11 world. The novels offer us two contrasting understandings of fundamentalism and help us gain a better understanding of the various terrorist figures and the American society itself. The personal experiences of both the protagonists reflect the political circumstances which they encounter, and the way both the protagonists identify themselves in the aftermath of the attacks.

The two novels unsettle the distinction between terrorist and terrorized in order to negotiate a new American identity after 9/11. These novels therefore represent the two perspectives and identities which are central to the War on Terror narrative and allow us to explore the dominant and counter narratives. These two novels try to explore the psyche of both the victims and victimizers. Literature of Terror serves as a reminder to the rise of terrorism today. It is time we understood and realized we are all humans irrespective of our religion and culture and that every life matters.

Peaceful coexistence comes through mutual respect and equality, not inequality and dominance. The only way forward for all of us, assuming we all want to live peacefully is to work hard and strive for equality within and between nations, continents and groups. If we all live and let

live, share and play fair, pray and let pray we might be able to move forward. Keniston and Quinn are right when they remark:

Literature offers a way beyond binary thinking... not because it is entertaining or titillating but because, unlike journalism and jingoism, it refuses familiar sentiments. Because literature is difficult, indirect, and allusive, because it mixes verisimilitude with imagination, the literal with the symbolic, it can express something of the complexity of 9/11. (Keniston& Quinn 2008, p. 14)

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