

Original Paper

Cultural Trauma in DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Abstract

Don DeLillo's Falling Man concentrates on the 9/11 catastrophe with its grand historical background, complex language, changing spaces and complicated narrative structure. This article tries to put Falling Man under the perspective of trauma and examine Don DeLillo's exploration of the cultural trauma, the relations between the Western world and the Islamic world. In the novel, DeLillo uses individual trauma to represent the cultural trauma experienced by the nation as a whole. In the meantime, DeLillo juxtaposes two cultures in the novel by narrating from two perspectives to show the long-standing misunderstanding and conflict between two different cultures and discusses the possibility of dialogue between them.

Keywords

Falling Man, cultural trauma, narrative

1. Introduction

As one of the most influential events in the twenty-first century and human history, 9/11 changed the world on the global level. Facing such kind of history-changing event, writers give their contemplation through their works on 9/11, and 9/11 literature thus has become an important literature category. In 2007, American writer Don DeLillo published *Falling Man*, which focuses on the 9/11 catastrophe with its grand historical background, complex language, changing spaces and complicated narrative structure. Because of this, *Falling Man* is considered as the work that defines 9/11. After its publication, many critics have interpreted this work from different perspectives, such as its postmodern writing style, terrorism, narrative structure, and photographic history and so on. Joseph M. Conte studies *Falling Man* from the perspective of politics. He argues that "it does not reiterate but engages in a dialectical reassessment of the relation of global corporatism and terrorism" (Conte, 2011, p. 559), his emphasis is mainly on the artistic image of *Falling Man* and he suggests the readers and researchers should not only focus on the unspeakable loss but also interpret the affective and symbolic values that it holds for all. Aaron Mauro studies *Falling Man* from the perspective of photographic history within the realm of

trauma theory and the aesthetics of falling. Linda Kauffman points out that *Falling Man* manages to portray terror in regard to otherness in its global as well as domestic contexts. It not only shed light on the intricate nature of otherness in relation to capitalist utopia, but also attempts to reconstruct the missing link between aesthetics and politics. What's more, it points out the potential intimacy between the victim and the victimizer (Kauffman, 2008, p. 354). Hamza Ally studies *Falling Man*'s expression of the societal shock represented by 9/11 and of private and public mourning in response to terrorism (2019, p. 348). While this paper is interested in how DeLillo presents the cultural trauma by narrating individual trauma and shows his exploration of the cultural trauma, the relations between the Western world and the Islamic world. In the novel, DeLillo juxtaposes two cultures in the novel by narrating from two perspectives to show the long-standing misunderstanding and conflict between two different cultures and discusses the possibility of dialogue between them.

Falling Man mainly concerns a survivor of the 9/11 attacks and its impact on his life thereafter. At the beginning of this novel, Keith Neudecker survived from the disaster and walks to the apartment he previously lived with his son Justin and estranged wife Lianne. In his recovery process, Keith begins to repair the broken relationships between him and Lianne, but at the same time he develops a romantic relationship with Florence, another survivor of the 9/11 attacks, whose briefcase Keith accidentally took with him from a stairwell when he walks out of the twin tower. In his life after 9/11, he recollects his poker friends again and again and the trauma that he experienced has become an essential part of his life. Due to his psychological trauma, Keith cannot get back to normal life again so he gives up his family life and becomes a full-time professional poker player. Though from the surface level, *Falling Man* can be interpreted as the narrative of individual trauma, if we examine it deeper, it is national narrative in essence, DeLillo uses individual trauma to represent the cultural trauma that suffers by the nation as a whole.

2. Narrating Individual and National Trauma

In *Falling Man*, the protagonist Keith Neudecker survives from the catastrophe and gets injured slightly. From that moment on, all the people in New York represented by Keith's family live in trauma, they cannot get rid of the invasion and damage of their life which are brought by 9/11. In the beginning of the novel, the description of New York is like hell: "it was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 3), Keith narrowly escapes from the building, then he turns up at the door of his wife, Lianne. In Lianne's words, Keith "likes gray soot head to toe—like smoke, standing there, with blood on his face and clothes" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 8). This scene looks terrible, but in fact it is not the worst, because Keith is not badly injured physically but mentally. "A man came out of an ash storm, all blood and slags, reeking of burnt matter, with pinpoint glints of slivered glass in his face. He looked immense, in the doorway, with a gaze that had no focus in it" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 87). Herman defines trauma as "an experience in which an individual is directly involved in or witness an event which evokes feelings of a loss of safety, helplessness, intense fear,

horror, and a threat of annihilation” (Herman, 1997, p. 1). For the trauma victim, they are unable to integrate their emotional experience with their later life, they are haunted by their terrible experience. After 9/11, Keith re-experiences the trauma mentally and physically as he always dreams of what he and his friends have experienced in the past, Keith always dreams of the man who falls off the building and what he has experienced. He dreams of the details of how his poker partner Rumsey died. In his affair with Florence, Keith patiently listens to Florence’s talk about the catastrophe which he himself experienced many times. It seems that Keith’s memory stops at the moment of the explosion, just as Caruth pointed out that the traumatic event was not absorbed and experienced at the beginning, it is kind of “belatedness”, the belatedness and afterward-ness makes the victim of trauma be fixed at certain “time point” of the past (Caruth, 1996, p. 37). Freud first points out this kind of belatedness by saying that “it may happen that someone gets away from, apparently unharmed, the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which one can ascribe only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a traumatic neurosis” (Freud, 1933, p. 109). The belatedness of Keith’s traumatic experience comes later, even three years after the catastrophe he still cannot cope with his new life.

Certain symptoms and problems always show up in the trauma victims. Violence is one of the common symptoms of psychological trauma. In the novel, Keith becomes more sensitive and more violent than before and we can see this point very clearly from the following details. In the novel, Keith and Florence meet at the shopping mall and when they get to the mattress department at Macy’s, Florence sits at the mattress and smiles at Keith. There are another two men who stand not far away from him. When one of them tells something to the other man, Keith thinks that they two are talking about Florence, “it is a remark about Florence” because “it was clear from their stance and their vantages that Florence was the subject” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 132), so he attacks those two men. At this point, it’s easy to notice that the psychological trauma Keith is suffering turns to violence. In *Falling Man*, Keith’s wife, Lianne, though she is not the survivor of the 9/11 event in the two towers, nevertheless suffers from psychological trauma. She often gets up at midnight to read books—*Fear and Trembling* (which functions as a trigger or reminder) written by Danish philosopher Kierkegaard; the performing artist’s performance of falling man makes her think of the falling building; and also the middle-eastern style music makes her think of the terrorist and becomes more sensitive. In the novel, one of Lianne’s neighbors always plays middle-eastern music loudly which annoys Lianne very much. She doesn’t like that kind of music because it is “another set of traditions, Middle Eastern, North African—music located in Islamic tradition” and she “thought of knocking on the door and saying something” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 67). Later, with her impatience and sensitivity to the music, she had a fight with Elena, her neighbor who plays the music. Once again, the psychological trauma the victim (Lianne) is suffering turns to violence. When she looks at the paintings at her mother’s home, she cannot help thinking of the catastrophe. In the painting, there are several items, two of the taller items were dark and somber, with

smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. All the items are kitchen objects but when they are removed from the kitchen and free of the kitchen, they become something that can remind people of the twin towers, Lianne's mother's lover Martin sees the twin towers in the painting. When asked what she saw in the painting, Lianne "saw what he saw. She saw the towers" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 49), the same kind of cognition and feeling is the same traumatic result of the 9/11 event. Besides adults, children are also the victims of 9/11. In *Falling Man*, Justin is the young son of Keith and Lianne. Justin has two other friends to hang out with. Justin is often sadly confused about the attacks and watches the skies with his friends for Bill Lawton, which most probably means Bin Laden to them, they stare through binoculars from the 27th floor and they keep searching for more planes sent by an enemy. In another scene, Justin is confused by the repetition of the towers falling on the news. "We know they're coming", explains Justin, "because (Bill Lawton) says they are. But that's all I'm allowed to say. He says this time the towers will fall" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 19).

The trauma that Keith's whole family suffers can be understood as psychological trauma and national trauma. National trauma is a crisis or a tragic experience which affects the spirit of a nation or an ethnicity, sometimes for generations to come. The twin towers which falls apart in 9/11 is symbolic, for it is "a representation of man's belief in humanity, his need for individual dignity, his belief in the cooperation of men, and through this cooperation, his ability to find greatness" (Sherman, 2006, p. 20). For its significance, the twin towers becomes the target of several terrorist attacks, its fall in the 9/11 attack is the attack on the whole American people, American identity, just as Martin, a character in the novel said: "they strike a blow to this country's dominance. They achieve this, to show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, that occupies" (DeLillo, 2007, p. 46). In all, from the description of the individual person, individual family to the whole country, *Falling Man* narrates the trauma that tortures individuals and Americans collectively.

3. Rethinking Cultural Trauma

The 9/11 attack was "widely described as a moment of historical rupture, an epochal event that drew a clear line through world history, dividing what came after 9/11 from what went before" (Holloway, 2008, p. 1) In some way, 9/11 changed the whole world and provides an opportunity for the whole world to rethink about different cultures, countries and international relations. With regard to 9/11, Judith Butler points out that the 9/11 catastrophe momentarily disrupted the American nation's narcissistic understanding of itself, providing it with an opportunity to re-think its relations and interdependency with other nations, the narratives triggered in its wake immediately shored up a first-person perspective that reasserted impenetrable boundaries between self and others (Butler, 2004, p. 1). Butler continues to argue that the US lost the opportunity to reflect on injury as such, "to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways" (Butler, 2004, p. xii). In order to reflect on the global power relations and one's own vulnerability with that of others, Americans as a whole have to

abandon their former unilateral narrative and begin a different narrative discourse. *Falling Man* is DeLillo's attempt to put the two civilizations, the Christian and Islamic, in dialogue, to make people think from different perspectives. Jeffrey C. Alexander gives cultural trauma such a definition, "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irreversible ways (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). By this definition, cultural trauma is not a scientific concept but a political and social concept. Because the cultural trauma's emphasis is on culture, and society is constructed by culture, therefore, when trauma happens, a lot of social groups, nations and even the whole civilization can be understood as the cause and source of human suffering.

Culture can be viewed as synonyms to civilization. In his famous book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington points out that people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-cold world. He divides civilization into several kinds, the Western Civilization which includes North America, Western and Central Europe, Australia and Oceania; the Orthodox world of the former Soviet Union; the Eastern world, which is the mix of the Buddhist, Chinese, Hindu and Japanese civilizations; the Muslim world and so on and so forth. Besides dividing the cultures into different kinds, Huntington offers six main explanations for the cause of civilization clash. The first reason is the differences among civilizations are too basic, that one country is different from the other in terms of history, language, culture, tradition, and, most importantly, in religion. These fundamental differences are the product of centuries, so they will not disappear soon; the second reason is that the world is becoming smaller. As a result, interactions and communications across the globe are increasing quickly and these interactions and communications intensify civilization consciousness and awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within civilizations; the third reason for that is the economic modernization and social changes, people are separated from longstanding local identities. Instead, religion has replaced this gap, which provides a basis for identity and commitment that transcends national boundaries and unites civilizations. Economic regionalism is increasing. Successful economic regionalism will reinforce civilization-consciousness. So, the West, represented by the US at the peak of its power and the non-Western countries with their increasing economic and political powers, their desire to shape the world in their own way are in conflict. Among them the conflict between the West civilization and Islamic civilization is the strongest.

The differences between Western culture and Islamic culture are affected by a long history, a history full of violent and bloody interactions dating back from the Muslim conquest of the Eastern Roman in the seventh century. Because of the bloody and violent history, a mutual distrust environment was created, and each side has some cultural stereotypes and misperceptions toward each other. The causes of religious and political conflict are deeply embedded in both cultures, as they held different views on personal freedom, crime and punishment, or the role of women in society. With their different cultures

and beliefs, the shared traumas and collective memories generated by a history of colonization and conflict shape their contemporary views. The social and economic impacts of modern European colonization in the Middle East, for example, reinforce negative Muslim perceptions concerning Western motives. In a culture dominated by Islamic tradition and long-term memories, those perceptions are readily magnified into larger notions of historical and religious conflict between Christianity and Islam. Such perceptions are the causes of fundamentalists, extremists and terrorists.

In the aftermath of trauma and the healing process, all the trauma victims have to understand the sudden change, understand the possibility that an “original” culture might suffer at the imposition of an “arriving” culture resulting in vulnerabilities of individuals, families/small groups, communities, and the larger societies (Stamm, 2004, p. 89). In order to show and make people understand the deep cause of 9/11, DeLillo juxtaposes two cultures in the novel by narrating from two perspectives, the family of Keith and Hammad, the terrorist. By letting both of them narrate their stories, belief and thinking, DeLillo shows the long-standing misunderstanding and conflict between two cultures and discusses the possibility of dialogue between two cultures.

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo portrays an Islamic terrorist named Hammad. In Hammad’s mind, America is their enemy historically and currently. Historically, the Christian culture and constantly in conflict with the Islamic culture. When Hammad was a rifleman in the Shatt al Arab, he saw thousands of boys being trained there. To Hammad, the shouts of the boys “were sounding the cry of history, the story of ancient Shia defeat and the allegiance of the living to those who were dead and defeated... Not like something happening yesterday but something always happening, over a thousand years happening, always in the air” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 78). These boys are very young yet they were trained to be martyrs to fight for the glory they have lost in the past thousands of years. Currently, the US is the superpower economically and politically. The great gap between the US and the Islamic countries make the Islamic countries feel being threatened, they are in panic. As Martin said in the novel, “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, p. 47). The disparity of power makes America interfere with other countries’ internal affairs, which causes more hatred and conflict. The Islamic world “want their place in the world, their own global union”, yet the American military interference makes that seem impossible, the 9/11 is a revenge of the Muslim to fight against America’s military hegemony. In the novel, when Amir, one of the terrorists watches the TV, he sees “wrong-eyed men and women laughing on TV, their military forces defiling the Land of the Two Holy Places” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 175), in his mind, his homeland is holy, and Americans abused their land.

Culturally, there are conflicts too. Muslims think America is a place where “everything was twisted, hypocrite”, and “the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 79). The Muslims are fearful that the powerful and influential western culture will destroy their own culture and “they think the world (western world) is a disease. This world, this society, ours” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 46). For Muslims, “there was the feeling of lost history. They were

too long in isolation. This is what they talked about, being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 80). As they feel that America is threatening their religion and their aspirations, they grow more and more hostile towards the West. While Americans hold the idea that the underdevelopment of Islamic culture is their own fault. Americans think that “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, p. 47). According to Martin, the art dealer in the novel, “Forget God. These are matters of history. This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives, their consciousness” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 47).

Besides putting the two cultures into dialogue, DeLillo also expresses his opinion on the bloody attack of the terrorists and the possibility of mutual understanding between two cultures. While Hammad in America was waiting for the call to conduct that terrorist attack, he thought about the meaning of his deeds carefully, he asks himself “does a man have to kill himself in order to accomplish something in the world?”, “does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find the way?” (DeLillo 2007, p. 174). These two questions question the thinking of the terrorists and stands for the self-reflection of the terrorists.

After the 9/11 attack, there is a performance artist who often imitates the falling gesture of those who jumped off the twin towers in 9/11 by suspending himself from high points in public places. His performance reminds people of the catastrophe and causes much anxiety and fear among the people, when he died, the newspaper published one sentence “Mayor says fall man moronic” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 222). Lianne had a fight with her neighbor who plays Muslim music, when they meet in the laundry later, they both do not know what to do and doubt that “whether a look would lead to words and then what” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 151). But people do look at each other and want to know each other, in the end of the novel, some people in America began to read the Koran, and they are “trying earnestly to learn something, find something that might help them think more deeply into the question of Islam” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 231). Lianne was also “ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue” (DeLillo, 2007, p. 236). All these all the signs of DeLillo’s optimistic prediction of mutual understanding of two cultures.

4. Conclusion

By narrating from different perspectives, Don DeLillo portrays the trauma suffering people in the aftermath of 9/11 in *Falling Man*. Narrating trauma is not the main concern of the novel, rethinking about relations between different cultures and countries constitute the theme of the novel. On the one hand, Americans are the victims of the terrorist attack, but on the other hand, the terrorists who sacrificed themselves to revenge America are also victims, the mutual damage is the result of their cultural misunderstanding and cultural trauma. In the novel, the author also expresses his idea about the

cause of the terrorist attack and prophets a better future.

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