

## Reconciliation and Coming Together in DeLillo's *Falling Man*

Saleem Dhobi

Assistant Prof. of English, Tribhuvan University

Email : gulsan2062bs@gmail.com

### Abstract

*This article underpins the possibility of coming together in the aftermath of 9/11 as depicted in Don DeLillo's Falling Man. The reconciliation between the minorities and the mainstream Americans can be possible in case conflicting groups move ahead for negotiation by accepting cultural differences that became the cause of the contemporary problems in the American society in the immediate future of the 9/11 attacks. The paper has explored that there is a huge possibility of reconciliation among diverse communities when the liberal Americans take initiatives as portrayed in the novel. The obstacles to the move for negotiation are fundamentalist Muslims and orthodox Americans who intensify conflict for their vested interests. The paper has employed qualitative research design to analyze the narrative and has also looked into the issue from the multicultural perspective that respects differences. Unity in diversity and strength in togetherness is the finding of the paper. Characters like Amir in the novel are Muslim fundamentalists and characters like Martin and Nina are liberals who seek for reunion among American communities as represented by Keith and Lianne.*

**Key Words :** Reconciliation, coming together, reunion, diversity, fundamentalism

### Introduction

The paper underscores the representation of possibility for reconciliation among diverse communities in the US society as depicted by Muslim and non-Muslim characters in DeLillo's *Falling Man*. The representation of Muslims and non-Muslims centers on the endeavors and aspirations for reconciliation and coming together. The novel tells the story of Keith Neudecker who has lived through 9/11 attacks. The subplot comprises of Hammad, a Muslim immigrant prepared to commit suicide bombing influenced by Mohamed Mohamed el-Amir el-Sayed Atta, a radical Muslim leader who glorifies the Muslim history including the Ottoman Empire. The relations of these Muslim characters with the non-Muslim characters reveal the ramification of 9/11 attacks on the intercultural relations among the US diverse communities. Non-Muslim characters such as Lianne, the former wife of Keith, her mother Nina, and Martin Ridnour and their opinions about the US and the Muslim World implies that 9/11 as an event has both political and cultural significance. The

9/11 attacks disturbed multicultural values in American society. The destruction of the twin towers, as observed by Simoes et al., symbolizes the downfall of the American empire (363). Their concise analysis reveals that the radical Islamic movement and the US occupancy in the Middle East were the specific causes of 9/11 attacks. The tragedy was a revengeful reaction to the US political hegemony as exemplified in the case of Amir who counsels Muslim youths for avenging on the US. Hammad, a Muslim youth, does not agree with Amir's logic. Consequently, he is prepared to perform suicide bombing. The representation of Hammad shows that Muslim youths unwillingly move toward radicalization. Religious fundamentalists particularly radical Muslims exemplified by Amir are obstacles for the integration of minority Muslims in the US society. However, the demonstration of the reunion of Lianne and Keith marks the hope for reconciliation between the minority Muslims and mainstream Americans. Mutual respect, understanding and acceptance lead diverse communities to coming together for the greater cause of the US society i.e. common prosperity.

### Literature Review

DeLillo's *Falling Man* demonstrates the contrastive positions between those who experienced the attacks first hand and those who watched the disasters on television sets. Matthew Leggatt states that the survivors including Keith and Florence undertook the attacks differently. For him, Florence obsessively retells the story of her journey down the stairs of the tower, while Keith keeps his understanding "bottled inside and his trauma is not revealed" (211) until he endeavors to set free his injured friend Rumsey. Leggatt analyzes the novel underscoring the representation of reactions of 9/11 survivors and the repercussions of the attacks.

Characterizing the key figure of the novel, Nath Aldalala'a in "Contesting the Story?: Plotting the Terrorist in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*" asserts, "contingent on Keith's orthodox American perspective; a modernist privileging of narration remains stylistically prominent and seeks to affirm a Western discourse" (71). The novel intertwines a counter-claim to this supremacy through the portrayal of Hammad's plan. When contextualizing the imaginary text within a dialogical relation to a real and indirect international rhetoric, DeLillo offers an undecided humanization of the terrorist that obscures fashionable understandings of terrorism, as Aldalala'a has explored. The enclosure of Hammad in an otherwise controlled personal field of experience brings in its specificity within a global political description (71). His measurement at both rhetorical and thematic levels is impenetrable.

*Falling Man* centralizes on Keith Neudecker's experience of the attacks on the World Trade Center and his worthless wandering within the limitations of time and space (Aldalala'a 73). The analysis reveals the Jihad with terror struggle of perpetrators who deem that the hereafter will be more pleasant, reliable, and sustainable than this earthly life. By constructing Muslim terrorist identities, DeLillo promotes the sense of othering (qtd. in Pirnajmuddin and Abbasali 120). "Since Muslims cannot integrate into the Western

civilization, they find themselves imprisoned in the Western societies, suppress their xenophobia, and finally, turning into global “parasites”, decide to destroy their host community" (Pirnajmuddin and Abbasali 121). The novel demonstrates divergence between Islam and the West. The novelist portrays Hammad with the beard and the latter is sure it would look better if he made it smaller abiding by the dictates of Islam. His life is structured to be a disciplined Muslim. Hammad thinks and does as other Muslims do. He is getting closer to them under the umbrella of union (83). The depiction of Muslims may confuse readers about the authorial point.

Gaj Tomas asserts that the threat of terror is the means to generate a new world as a hostile concept. When the planes had been exploded on the Twin Towers, the terror became the most authoritative factor to challenge American culture. The novel captures the world of terror different from natural calamity. DeLillo is concerned with both the victimizer and the victim. The novelist exhibits prime motives of the perpetrators of the tragedy (3). Likewise, Linda S. Kauffman claims that capitalism and terrorism are two opposite ideologies, which bump with each other, and they are beyond any control (357). The Al- Qaeda and the US symbolize terrorism and capitalism respectively. The US has had the sense of medieval vengeance and advanced technology, whereas the Al-Qaeda has been functioning through worldwide network of martyr brothers (Kauffman 356). For Tomas, *Falling Man* is from the attacker's viewpoint that clarifies readers' understanding of the tragedy. These critics have not seen any possibility for reconciliation between the minority and mainstream Americans. This gap is sought after to be fulfilled by the research undertaken in this paper.

### **Methodology**

The article employs a qualitative research paradigm. To analyze *Falling Man* by drawing the content that focuses on the issues such as intercultural relations, integration, and reconciliation, qualitative research method has been used that focuses on collecting data through open-ended and dialogic communication. This method is about why people think so rather than what they think. M. Kohlrabi defines:

Qualitative research is a form of social action that stresses on the way of people interpret, and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals. It makes the use of interviews, diaries, journals, classroom observations and immersions; and open-ended questionnaires to obtain, analyze, and interpret the data content analysis of visual and textual materials, and oral history (qtd. in Mohajan 3)

Qualitative method helps researchers to analyze the content. I interpret the behavior, beliefs, tone, emotions, experiences, and reactions of the fictional characters. I employ narrative analysis and interpretative analysis as techniques to analyze the novel. Kaya Yilmaz defines qualitative research, "as an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world" (312). For Yilmaz, a constructivist epistemology investigates socially constructed realities that are flexible and progressive by employing a framework that is

“value-laden, flexible, descriptive, holistic, and context sensitive; i.e. an in-depth description of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the people involved” (312). In Yilmaz’s perspective, social and psychological experiences are created and researchers must understand the socially constructed nature of the world.

### Analysis

This paper analyzes DeLillo’s *Falling Man* that portrays Muslim extremists like Amir who educate Muslim youths about the historical relations of the Muslim World with the US. Amir plans to harm the US through Muslim youths like Hammad. Amir responds to the Western culture as if the latter is against Islam. He is a Hajji and he takes the religious visit of Mecca as a duty of a true Muslim. After fulfilling the duty, he starts planning to perform “another kind of duty, unwritten, all of them, martyrs, together” (175). He emphasizes on killing the Westerners as a duty of a Muslim. When he is asked whether a man has to kill himself for something, he undertakes this query stating, “The end of our life is predetermined. We are carried toward that day from the minute we are born. There is no sacred law against what we are going to do. This is not suicide in any meaning or interpretation of the word. It is only something long written. We are finding the way already chosen for us” (*Falling Man* 175). In Amir’s viewpoint, Allah has already determined everything that happens in human life. Human beings must abide by the conventions of the almighty. He interprets killing oneself as martyrdom. This representation of Amir implies that extremists embed hatred in Muslim youths against Westerners. He strives to convince Hammad that Islam is in crisis since Westerners have been engaged in spoiling Muslim culture. He significantly manipulates Hammad’s perspectives about the West by drawing a line between Western World and Muslim World. On a different note, Peek asserts that ethnic minorities undertake religion as “a way of maintaining group identity and solidarity, and is often studied alongside ethnic identity” (qtd. in Vadher 30). Hammad joins Amir’s team of Muslim youths because he seeks support and Amir seeks for solidarity among them to avenge on the mainstream Americans.

Hammad who lives in Hamburg studies engineering. His girlfriend is Leyla. When he falls prey at the hands of Amir, he misses both friends and love. Amir makes Hammad a fanatic. “Amir looked at him, seeing right down to his base self. Hammad knew what he would say. Eating all the time, pushing food in your face, slow to approach your prayers. There was more. Being with a shameless woman, dragging your body over hers. What is the difference between you and all the others, outside our space?” (82). Amir underscores drawbacks of American culture. He erodes Hammad’s rationality by putting Muslims and Americans opposite. For Amir, the Westerners are shameless, hedonistic, and materialistic. Implicitly, he persuades Hammad to forget his girlfriend in order to maintain distance from American culture.

The depiction of Hammad’s perspective toward the US reveals that he internalizes Amir’s lectures and finally practices them. For example, Hammad cannot have sexual relationship with shameless women as per the dictate of Islam. Amir teaches Hammad about Islamic laws and endeavors to rationalize his propositions by alluding to the holy Qur’an.

Amir describes the attributes of an ideal believer and seeks Hammad to become identical to that personality. While tracing the plan of Hammad, the narrator states:

The beard would look better if he trimmed it. But there were rules now and he was determined to follow them. His life had structure. Things were clearly defined. He was becoming one of them now, learning to look like them and think like them. This was inseparable from jihad. He prayed with them to be with them. They were becoming total brothers. (*Falling Man* 83)

Amir finally prepares Hammad for suicide bombing. The rules and uniform process for religious martyrdom are the cloaks to blind Muslim youths like Hammad so that fundamentalists like Amir can achieve their goal. Amir encourages Hammad for suicide bombing. Finally, Hammad undertakes the mission of killing Americans. Such incidence results in isolating minority Muslims from the mainstream Americans.

The depiction of Amir demonstrates that Islamic fundamentalists disrespect and outcast liberal Muslims. Fanatics believe in uniformity, and conformity. Therefore, they want to establish a world of people guided by Islam; they are intolerant of the defiant. Amir induces Hammad to follow doctrines of Islam by losing the freedom of choice. Besides, there are other Muslim students pursuing technical education in the US. Amir encourages all of them to hate the West. "The talk was fire and light, the emotion contagious. They were in this country to pursue technical educations but in these rooms they spoke about the struggle. Everything here was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds" (*Falling Man* 79). The representation of the US as a corrupt nation that may ruin Islam reveals two things. First, minority Muslims cannot integrate into the American society because of religious fanaticism. Secondly, the US has been intervening in the Muslim World for the political reasons. These factors do not let diverse groups to come together.

On a different note, the representation of Martin—an active member of a collective in the late nineteen sixties called "Kommune One" in Germany named Ernst Hechinger—thinks that the jihadists have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies (*Falling Man* 142). He is Nina's lover travelling between Europe and the USA. For him, Islam as a faith does not allow killings. However, fundamentalists believe in violence and Americans generalize Muslims and relate Islam with violence. The narrator pictures:

How convenient it is to find a system of belief that justifies these feelings and these killings."

"But the system doesn't justify this. Islam renounces this," he said.

"If you call it God, then it's God. God is whatever God allows."

"Don't you realize how bizarre that is? Don't you see what you're denying? You're denying all human grievances against others, every force of history that places people in conflict." (*Falling Man* 112)

Even though Martin and Nina are Westerners, they are unbiased toward both Islam and Americans. The depiction of Martin reveals that he is the novelist's mouthpiece since he is a critical observer of the cultural phenomena in the aftermath of the 9/11. He is critical of both

the US mainstream culture and the Muslim culture. He also uncloaks the problems suffering the minorities in the US society. The paper shows that mediation through people like Martin and Nina can help ethnic groups to reconcile and come together for the national security and interests in the US society. The description of the conversation between Martin and Nina suggests that conflict sustains as long as force of history places people in it. The representation of Martin and Nina signifies two things. First, not all White characters are against Muslim characters. Secondly, the writer expresses his observation on ongoing cultural discourse through these characters. The novelist portrays the collision between Islam and Western culture that leads American ethnicities to hatred, suspicion, and misconceptions which discourage diverse communities to come together in the aftermath.

The novelist depicts Nina— a former professor of art—who takes heavy medication to fall asleep. She is Martin's beloved and Lianne's mother. She is not happy about Keith and Lianne. She enjoys American status that she has an apartment, lover, and money. She has personal opinions on the terror attacks. She passes remarks on both the American administration and Islamic fundamentalists when analyzing their political and economic motives. In her view, the US government has money, armies, technology, and human resources, which were defeated by the perpetrators of 9/11 (*Falling Man* 46-7). Nina mentions that the plentiful richness of the US became the cause of the 9/11 attacks. At the same time, she criticizes Islamic fundamentalists who prepare youths for suicide bombing. For her, fundamentalists use Muslim youths as means to achieve their economic and political goals. The illustration of Nina's conversation with Martin implies that geopolitics leads American soldiers and suicide bombers to kill civilians. DeLillo demonstrates that economy in the Muslim countries stays inactive because of the maximum use of Islam. He portrays the Muslim World driven by religion but does not assert that Islam is as the reason for poverty. For him, few fanatics misinterpret and misuse religion for their stakes. As a result, the cultural conflict continues in the intercultural relations of minority Muslims with mainstream Americans that leads the former to exclusion.

Besides, Muslim youths living in panic turn to radicalization and undertake specifically suicide bombing as a means of avenging on Westerners and attaining salvation because of fear implanted by fundamentalists by pointing out the Day of Judgment—the day on which God judges the world in righteousness—in paradise. Amir accuses Westerners of taking over the Ottoman Empire. By connecting 9/11 with the history of the war between West and Muslim World, Amir prepares youths to kill Westerners:

The man who led discussions, this was Amir and he was intense, a small thin wiry man who spoke to Hammad in his face. He was very genius, others said, and he told them that a man can stay forever in a room, doing blueprints, eating and sleeping, even praying, even plotting, but at a certain point he has to get out. Even if the room is a place of prayer, he can't stay there all his life. Islam is the world outside the prayer room as well as the *surahs* in the Koran. Islam is the struggle against the enemy, near enemy and far, Jews first, for all things unjust and hateful, and then the Americans. (*Falling Man* 80)

Amir argues that Islam seeks believers to submit. The representation of his delivery suggests that Islam is limited to the Qur'an. The portrayal of Amir symbolizes the figure of Osama bin Laden who was genius and a planner of terror acts. The novelist specifies controversies accorded in the Qur'an as it mentions that Jews are the first enemies of Muslims. The Holy Scripture mentions the Americans as enemies of Islam. The depiction of fundamentalists like Amir who categorize humanity between enemies and friends based on cultural and ideological differences implies that Americans sidelines Muslims because of their radicalization as substantiated with the case of Hammad. DeLillo shows that the collective exclusion of minority Muslims leads them to isolation.

However, the paper investigates into the possibility of reconciliation in the US society as depicted in the novel. DeLillo uncloaks the possibility of reconciliation between Americans and Muslims that is equivalent to the reunion of Lianne and Keith who had been divorced before the 9/11 attacks, but in the aftermath, they decide on accompanying each other to overcome the trauma. With the passage of time in the aftermath, they realize that they must reunite for harmony and integrity. The narrator says:

This is the point I want to make, that we need to stay together, keep the family going. Just us, three of us, long-term, under the same roof, not every day of the year or every month but with the idea that we're permanent. Times like these, the family is necessary. Don't you think? Be together, stay together? This is how we live through the things that scare us half to death."

"All right."

"We need each other. Just people sharing the air, that's all."

"All right," he said. (*Falling Man* 214)

The representation of Lianne and Keith suggests that despite their inconsistent relationship, they settle with each other for betterment of the family. They wrap up that happiness and integrity can be possible if they forget their differences and connect with each other based on the common interests. In a similar fashion, Americans and Muslims can come together to fight the external attacks for the national security and prosperity by accepting differences. The image of 'air' as sharable to all is compatible to the US—a nation of many cultures and ethnicities. Integration of minority Muslims is only the means to ensuring security and progress. Berry defines, "acculturation needs to be understood as 'the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members'" (qtd. in Houtkamp 75). In Berry's view, assimilation refers to "complete adaptation of the minority to the majority culture", whereas integration takes place when people prefer both to value their cultural heritage and to keep in touch with other cultural groups (qtd. in Houtkamp 75-6). For Berry, minorities prefer integration as an acculturative strategy, whereas mainstream people want immigrants to follow the assimilation and in some instance the integration (qtd. in Houtkamp 77). The opposite preferences distance them from each other. However, the novel shows hopes for reconciliation and coming together.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the possibility of reconciliation and coming together between minority Muslims and mainstream Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 as depicted in DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Despite consistent conflict between the Muslims and Westerners that has been intensified by the 9/11 attacks, these groups have to negotiate for national security and prosperity. Their differences can be the means for unity and strength of the multicultural set-up of the US society. The article has found that fanaticism and orthodoxy have discouraged diverse communities from integrating and accepting each other. However, mediation by the liberals from both Muslim and mainstream American communities can help to reconcile for harmony and peace. The novelistic representation has demonstrated the tremendous avenues for mutual respect and recognition as they can cement the crevices prevailed in the US society. The paper has undertaken the qualitative method of research design to analyze the novel from the multicultural perspective that ultimately shows the strength of diversity with due focus on cultural differences. The reunion of Keith and Lianne has been analogous to the reconciliation between Muslims and non-Muslims in the US society in the aftermath as portrayed in the novel.

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