

Religiosity and Radicalization in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Abstract

*This article analyzes DeLillo's *Falling Man*, a 9/11 novel to explore the causes of conflict between the Muslim World and the West. How Islam impacts on their relationship has been the core aspect of discussion in the paper. The paper has found out that there are two paradigms of Islam: fundamentalist and liberal. The former has radicalized Muslim youths in the US universities as exemplified in the case of Hammad, the primary character in the novel. The agents of Islamic fundamentalism including Amir who provokes and prepares youths for suicide bombing have misused Islam for their vested interests. Geopolitics is one of the primary causes of the ongoing conflict between the West and the Muslim World. Radicalization has been found as a very devastating factor among youths as it spoils their future and blinds them to take the physical world meaningless. The author has demonstrated the problems created by the agents of both the West and the Muslim World to implant the seed of hatred against each other. Consequently, the innocent become victims of their heinous intents. Despite advocacy for human values by liberal Americans, Eurocentric mindset prevails as depicted in the novel. Thus, Islamic fundamentalism and Eurocentricism have widened the gap between the West and the Muslim World.*

Key Words: Portrayal, Religion, Radicalism, Liberalism, Multiculturalism, Marginalization

Introduction

This paper underlines the impact of Islam on practicing believers and also demonstrates how the agents of religion radicalize the innocent as depicted in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. The representation of Hammad's perspective toward the US reveals that he internalizes Amir's instructions and commandants and finally brings them into action. Hammad as a believer in Islam cannot have sexual relationship with shameless women. Amir is engaged in preparing Muslim youths for suicide bombing questions liberal and democratic spirit of Muslims as well. Amir teaches Hammad about Islamic laws and endeavors to justify 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 preparation of Hammad, DeLillo writes:

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

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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 appropriates Hammad to the standard set for a suicide bomber seeking for martyrdom. The rules and uniform process for religious martyrdom are the cloaks to Muslim youths like Hammad so that fundamentalists like Amir can achieve their goal. Amir motivates Hammad by necessitating suicide bombing. Consequently, Hammad gets ready for the mission of killing Americans.

Analysis

The article delves into the portrayal of Amir to demonstrate Islamic fundamentalists who disrespect and outcast liberal Muslims. Fanatics like Amir believe in uniformity, and conformity. Therefore, they struggle to establish a world of people guided by Islam; they are intolerant of the defiant. Amir induces Hammad to follow fundamentalist Islam by losing the freedom of choice. There are other Muslim students in the novel who pursue technical education in the US. Amir targets all of them to stand against the West. For this, he contrasts the Western culture with Muslim culture. "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 portrayal of the US as a corrupt nation that is likely to ruin Islam reveals two things. First, it shows that minority Muslims cannot integrate into the American society because of Islamic fundamentalism. Secondly, the West particularly, the US has been intervening in the Muslim World for the political interests. The geopolitical conflict between the West and the Muslim World leads Muslim students in the US universities to radicalism. The geopolitical issues are predominant in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. He argues, "since it is obvious that no imperial mission or scheme can ever ultimately succeed in maintaining overseas control forever, history also teaches us that domination breeds resistance, and that the violence inherent in the imperial contest—for all its occasional profit or pleasure—is an impoverishment for both sides" (288). The Western dominance across the Muslim World may be one of the causes of the resistance initiated by Amir. The exploration reveals that geopolitical cause equally affects the intercultural relationship of minority Muslims with the Westerners.

However, the portrayal of Islamic fundamentalists who take Islam as the best religion and Mohammad as the last prophet suggests that dogmatism nurtures the cultural fault-line in American society. Fanatics seek the world to become a single nation and the law of Islam be implemented. DeLillo portrays fanaticism as a barrier for ethnic groups in maintaining peace, unity, and integrity. The extremists like Amir impose the *Shari'a* law—the body of Islamic rules and teachings that govern Muslims' familial and social relations—upon Hammad. Besides, the US political interference in the Muslim countries is another major cause of the cultural isolation of Muslims. Underscoring the US reaction, Ismael

Hossein-zadeh claims that the amplified approach of America to war and violence may be a sign of the symbolic domestic war over distribution of resources within the country. The American administration took 9/11 as an opportunity to inflate the Pentagon budget on militarization. The tragedy occurred in a political-economic framework that greatly patterned its perspective and its repercussion (qtd in Cvek 4-5). Hossein-zadeh's reading suggests that the US took the 9/11 as an opportunity to expand its imperialism by amplifying the military budget. Her analysis challenges the conventional response of a nation to the tragedy of 9/11.

DeLillo portrays 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 USA. He takes Islam as a faith that does not allow killings. For him, however, Islamic fundamentalists believe in violence and Americans generally understand Islam as a violent religion. The writer elaborates:

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)

Although Martin and Nina are White characters, they are unbiased toward both Islam and Americans. For them, Islam does not justify violence. The portrayal of Martin reveals that he is DeLillo's mouthpiece since he is a neutral but critical observer of the ongoing cultural phenomena in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. He is critical of both the US mainstream culture and the Islamic fundamentalists.

On a different note, DeLillo 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 a strong character with her personal opinions on the terror attacks. She is a critical character who 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 abundant richness of the US became the cause of the 9/11 attacks. Meanwhile, she harshly criticizes Islamic fundamentalists who mislead Muslim youths to suicide bombing. For her, Islamic fundamentalists implant hatred amongst Muslim youths so that the former can employ the latter as means to achieve their economic and political goals. DeLillo demonstrates that economy in the Muslim countries stays stagnant 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.

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 counsels Hammad and other Muslim students in the US to avenge on the West. His provocative speech stimulates cultural fissures. He accuses Westerners of taking over the Ottoman Empire. By connecting 9/11 with the history of the war between West and Muslim World, Amir endeavors to provoke 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 portrayal of his delivery suggests that Islam is limited to the Qur'an. It is not practical, since its followers rely on the lines of the Qur'an that implant hatred for unbelievers. The portrayal of Amir symbolizes the figure of Osama bin Laden who was genius and a planner of terror acts. DeLillo 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 portrayal of the intercultural enmity as accorded in the Qur'an leads minority Muslims to exclusion in the American society. The depiction of fundamentalists like Amir who categorize humanity between enemies and friends based on cultural and ideological differences suggests that Americans exclude Muslims because of Muslims' radicalization as substantiated with the case of Hammad. For Kauffman, *Falling Man* portrays Justin and Keith who respond to trauma by acting out, whereas Lianne courageously endeavors to "work through the trauma" (655). In Kauffman's view, Lianne tries to know history, geography, demography, and Islam of the Middle East. Besides, she tries to read the Qur'an "she wants to assimilate the catastrophe" that has badly affected her "family, city, and the nation" (655). DeLillo frequently uses the terms "absorb" and "assimilate" to show Lianne's desire. By portraying her, DeLillo demonstrates that White Americans seek minorities to assimilate into dominant culture. The portrayal of Lianne reveals that she is prejudiced against Arab Muslims. Her preoccupation about Arabs becomes an obstacle for her to reciprocate cultural differences. Instead of prolonging grief, accepting the trauma normally, could help to return to normalcy. Instead of seeking minority Muslims to assimilate, mainstream Americans can help them to integrate by forgetting the clashes of the past, as Lianne forgets the entire catastrophe. The portrayal may imply that by sorting out cultural conflicts extant between minority Muslims and mainstream Americans can strengthen multiculturalism. While showing the linkage between the 9/11 and its depiction, Hamilton Carroll states that the novel:

explores the relationship between the event and its representations and the novel is concerned, primarily, with charting the limits of representation in the face of the seemingly unrepresentable. If the events of September 11 produced a crisis of representation, I ask, how is that crisis manifest in contemporary US narrative fiction and in DeLillo's novel in particular? (108)

DeLillo portrays the tragedy of 9/11 by constructing characters from different ethnicities. The novel demonstrates that there is a huge effect of the event on the cultural relationship in the multicultural set-up of American society. The portrayal of Hammad may imply that Islamic fundamentalists manipulate and mechanize innocent youths to retaliate against the US. The writing style of Hammad's sections demonstrates fragmented passages and incoherent thoughts, which reflect on his baffled mind. In the first section of Hammad, "On Marienstrasse," a street in Hamburg, Germany, where a group of Muslim extremists apparently is planning the attacks, Hammad notes, "Everything here was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds" (*Falling Man* 99). He further states, "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* 100). Hammad fails to decide on whether to join the extremists. He is more concerned with the family life rather than faith that demands sacrifices from its followers. The portrayal reveals that Islam accords non-Muslims as enemies of Muslims. The Americans are intermediary enemies for Muslims. Under this postulate, Hammad is prepared to harm Americans.

Initially, Hammad's initial portrayal is not of a typical Islamic fundamentalist, but later, Amir grooms him to perform the role of a suicide bomber. Although initially he is resistant to the radical indoctrination of terror, he gradually gets more involved with Islamic extremists. He is in a relationship with his girlfriend, "sometimes he wanted to marry her and have babies" (*Falling Man* 104). A man, who has been planning to lead a normal life, is misled to hatred. Actually, Hammad's conscience does not allow him to follow the extremist line. Even though he does not understand why he is growing a beard as he has been asked to do so, "He spent time at the mirror looking at his beard, knowing he was not supposed to trim it" (*Falling Man* 104); although he knows, it "would look better if he trimmed it. But there were rules now and he was determined to follow them" (*Falling Man* 105). Islamic fundamentalism is depicted as an obstacle to Hammad's integration into the American society. The 9/11 brings the deep-rooted conflict between the West and radical Muslims to the surface. The worse the intercultural relation of minority Muslims with mainstream Americans is, the more disintegrated the American society becomes. The radical Islamists like Amir mislead peace-loving minority Muslims like Hammad to suicide bombing. DeLillo does not stereotype Muslims. Rather, he shows the repercussion of Islamic fundamentalism in the intercultural relations between minority Muslims and mainstream Americans.

The demonstration of Islamic fundamentalists like Amir, who groom Hammad to commit suicide bombing unveils the resurgence of cultural cleavages. The second section about Hammad in which the group has moved to the US and is taking flight training, after first attending a training camp in Afghanistan. Hammad “wore a bomb vest and knew he was a man now, finally, ready to close the distance to God” (*Falling Man* 219). After preparing him for suicide bombing under the premise that he shall enter the paradise to experience the almighty, he thinks he is closer to Allah. Greed for heavenly life leads him to sacrifice his life. However, Hammad still does not seem certain, as he wonders if “a man [has] to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find a way” (*Falling Man* 223). The novelist portrays Hammad as a devout Muslim who follows Amir’s orders. Amir dictates Hammad and asks him to behave appropriately, as Hammad has to accomplish a religious mission. He reflects on his actions, “He had to struggle against himself, first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives” (*Falling Man* 105). It shows that he undertakes Amir’s opinion. Nevertheless, Hammad still struggles, especially concerning “the lives of the others he takes with him” (*Falling Man* 223). When he asks Amir to explain, the latter speaks, “The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them”, a logic that “impresses” Hammad (*Falling Man* 224). The portrayal infers that Hammad lacks rationality to defend his position. Rather, he feels insecure who intends to live a “normal” life, yet Islamic fundamentalists prepare him to control his destiny by harming the US. The intolerance of Islamic fundamentalists becomes an obstacle to the integration of minority Muslims.

In the similar line of argument, Linda S. Kauffman accuses DeLillo of manipulating images of Muslims through the sketches of the terrorists transforming them into triad: background, psychology, and development. Hammad as portrayed is a jihadist. Although he wants his family, he chooses death when he comes to know that he must resist and eventually prefers to become a martyr with his friends (355). The novel demonstrates the reasons for youths' deliberate commitment of suicide. Death and disaster are dominant themes in the novel. Muslim youths are preoccupied with degeneration and disrupted psyche. Thus, the novel comprises in themes such as time, chance, destruction, and transformation (367). I think Muslim jihadists are mentally prepared to lose their lives happily under the premise that they will have better life in the hereafter, which is still questionable. The tradition of martyrdom in Islam seems to be the expression of the Western mindset about the orient that perpetuates in 9/11 fiction.

Hammad's perspective about jihad is suspicious. Hammad overcomes his impulses and is ready to perform terror. Thus, the power of strong mind will change the world, as DeLillo remarks that the end of one world in the horror of other world will take place. The power of terror becomes stronger. Hijacking of the planes refers to the initiation of the change that first emerged in the minds of the Islamists (Tomas 3). These two worlds, however, do not justify that perpetrators were Islamic and they aimed to replace the capitalistic world led by the US with their world of *shari'a* led by the Islamists. For me, the

novel increases the horror and implants the suspicion among the civilians that the Muslims could not tolerate the civilization other than Islam. The novelist questions the continued othering and isolation of Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11.

By showing the novelist's manipulation of the downfall of the Empire, Marta de Sousa Simoes et al write that the novel has exploited the concept of destruction and downfall of the American Empire and society by using symbolic images (363). The perpetrators of 9/11 wanted to affect all parts and dimensions of the power of the American culture and this narrative is a response to the terror, which was unavoidable (371). I think the 9/11 attacks threatened the US capitalistic values and political intervention in the Muslim World. The Twin Towers were symbolic of the American economy and militarism. The attacks warned the contemporary American administration to stay within limitations. Otherwise, they would have to face more attacks. The novelist portrays the war that has been between the American culture and the Islamists since 9/11. The portrayal of the characters with Muslim backgrounds indicates that the representation of Muslim terrorists insinuates overgeneralization of the Muslims.

Ismael Hossein-zadeh believes that the increased trend of the US to war and violence is probably a sign of the symbolic domestic war over distribution of national resources. The contemporary American administration took the 9/11 as an opportunity to expand militarization to justify the "continuous hemorrhaging of the Pentagon budget" (qtd. in Cvek 4-5) and the event occurred within an already political-economic structure that largely structured its perceptive and its implications. Cvek describes that when hijacking the plane on 9/11, Hammad cannot memorize the way he was cut. The description shows that the disconnection between the actions of Hammad's body and his thought can help explain the process through which the almost-human terrorist, who continually suspects his own actions, eventually surrenders to the monarch will of the arch-terrorist Amir (8). The tragedy made Americans opportune to express their anger on Muslims. The novel functioned to accelerate the suspicion on Muslims as terrorists. The novel lacks the ability of representation. Rather, it should be read in relation to the embarrassment of the event in the network of worldwide relationships (11-2). If DeLillo had been able to capture the event objectively, perhaps the representation would have become nearer to truth. DeLillo's failure of representation is evident in the breakdown of Lianne's liberal democratic individuality when she behaves with her Arab neighbor unintentionally, irrationally, intolerantly and violently (Cvek 14). I think creating such a context in the narrative shows DeLillo's critique of the Eurocentric mindset.

Both representation and identity of Muslims are the dominant themes. Martina Pavlikpra investigates into the possibilities of exploring individuals' identity and their tendency to invent their own identities collectively (15). The tragedy of 9/11 is the manifestation of human defenselessness, a catastrophic unawareness and limitation, the human mortality and the related compulsion of restricted human existence (17). Mohammed Atta, one of the hijackers puts himself in the position of an instrument of God's will

(Pavlikpra 11). For me, employing Muslim characters as attackers in the narrative questions the objectivity of DeLillo's authorial role. People of any faiths can perpetrate terrors, as the terrorists believe in the faith of violence. Pavlikpva's argument shows that the hijacker creates his personal philosophy of death to justify his terror. In her view, the rationale for this is that the individual mission is to kill the masses referred as the others. These others do not have any rights to live any longer. Passion drives Atta (13). The portrayal of Atta is the expression of personal idiosyncrasy, since DeLillo without focusing on the context, in which Muslims can start jihad, has cast his characters.

DeLillo demonstrates different incidences of terror to reflect on people who believe in violence and take it as a means of taking revenge on their enemies. Implicitly, the novelist critiques radical version of Islam. Lianne talks in a group in the presence of Benny T—an individual without a faith. Lianne is critical about the God, "Lianne struggled with the idea of God. She was taught to believe that religion makes people complaint. This is the purpose of religion, to return people to a childlike state. Awe and submission, her mother said. This is why religion speaks so powerfully in laws, rituals and punishments" (62). Lianne believes that religion revives people's childish nature. It erodes people's rationality. The portrayal suggests that DeLillo is critical of the ramification of Islamic fundamentalism in the integrative task of Muslim youths who lose their lives happily instead of leading normal life. It also infers that religious extremism is so deep-rooted among minority Muslims that they fail to reciprocate cultural differences. The writer portrays Omar, a Muslim who feels closer to God, communicates with Lianne by separating him to his prayer room. Thus, DeLillo writes:

"I am closer to God, I know it, we know it, they know it."

"This is our prayer room," Omar said.

No one wrote a word about the terrorists. And in the exchanges that followed the readings, no one spoke about the terrorists. She prompted them. There has to be something you want to say, some feeling to express, nineteen men come here to kill us. (*Falling Man* 63-64)

The portrayal of Muslims like Omar who do not see the world beyond their prayer room illustrates that such Muslims imagine being closer to God. In similar fashion, the perpetrators of 9/11 had been trained to believe that they were closer to God when they were about to attack on the Twin Towers. Fundamentalists by eroding people's minds lead them to crimes. Lianne underscores 'nineteen men come here to kill us' that insinuates that Americans have not forgotten the 9/11 attacks. They are still in trauma. Meanwhile, fanatics like Omar still promote Islamic fundamentalism in the American society. The portrayal of the fanatics diminishes the possibility of eradicating cultural fissures, as fanatics on the one hand do not allow minority Muslims to adapt to the American society and on the other, they provoke counter extremism among mainstream Americans.

Contrarily, DeLillo critiques Americans engaged in myth-making culture, as it leads children to bigotry toward Muslims who look alike Bill Laden. Orthodox Americans

propagate hatred against Muslims. Their hostility and prejudice worsen intercultural relations between minority Muslims and mainstream Americans. Most importantly, the aggravated cultural disharmony leads Americans to intolerance and unacceptability. The novel shows that Lianne, "looked at Keith, searching for his concurrence, for something she might use to secure her free-floating awe. He chewed his food and shrugged. "So, together," he said", they developed the myth of Bill Lawton"" (*Falling Man* 74). Myth is something handed down from generation to generation. People of the generations other than of the 9/11 cannot experience real Bin Laden, but they can treat people identical to Bin Laden in the similar manner. Instead of pacifying the cultural conflict, the myth of Laden can traumatize. Consequently, both mainstream Americans and American Muslims cannot go together for the national cause of the US. The portrayal of Bill Lawton demonstrates the stereotypes of Muslims. Describing the image of Bin Laden, the writer elaborates:

"Bill Lawton has a long beard. He wears a long robe," he said.

"He flies jet planes and speaks thirteen languages but not English except to his wives. What else? . . .

. . . "The other thing he does, Bill Lawton, is go everywhere in his bare feet."

"They killed your best friend. They're fucking outright murderers. Two friends, two friends." (*Falling Man* 74)

The portrayal of Bin Laden reflects on his lifestyle, multiple wives, and his magnetic capacity to influence Muslims for the religious cause. 'He has the power to poison' means he was a charismatic personality who could convince Muslims to suicide bombing. The depiction of Bill Lawton reveals that non-English speaking Muslims are sought after to speak English. Knowledge on Bill Lawton could make children revengeful that eventually leads American children to aggression and its expression.

Conclusion

The paper has explored the tremendous impact of religion and ethnicity on identification and recognition of Muslims and white Americans respectively as portrayed in the novel. The agents of Islam radicalize the innocent. Amir is that agent who endeavors to implant the seed of hatred among Muslim youths against non-believers of Islam. There are two paradigms of Islam: fundamentalist Islam and liberal Islam. The former is parochial and does not respect differences, whereas the latter advocates spiritualism by fostering human values. The conflict between Americans and Muslims as portrayed in the novel has had its root in geopolitics that is linked up with financial dominance and control in the oil sources of the Muslim world. As the West has always sought to control those sources, Muslim students who study in the universities of the USA seek to be united against the Westerners. The very geopolitical conflict has also radicalized Muslim youths in American universities as exemplified in the case of students who listen to Amir's long and provocative speeches. Consequently, such students including Hammad get ready for suicide bombing as well. The paper has investigated into the core causes of religious conflicts detached Muslims from Americans in the aftermath of 9/11.

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