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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Psychoanalytic Study of DeLillo's *Falling Man*

Abstract

This article discusses Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* as a novel that explores the post traumatic stress disorder, a psychological shock and its effect after the attack on the Twin Tower on September 2011. People witnessed the attack. Media telecasted the attack immediately and repeatedly. It created a sensation throughout the world. People started questioning their beliefs. This article explores the mental state of the characters, Keith and Lianne of *Falling Man*. The crucial and pitiable status of the characters are detailed in this article.

Keywords: Trauma, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Media, Debris, Alzheimer, Organic Shrapnel

DeLillo has established himself as an author, an essayist and a playwright of the contemporary American Literature. *Americanana*, *White Noise*, *Underworld*, *Libra* are some of his notable fictions that acclaimed him to be one of the best authors of America. His literary production to date includes sixteen novels and five plays. DeLillo's writings deal with the contemporary American Society, which survives with the emerging issues like, toxic spills, consumerism, conspiracy, terrorism, mass media, cultural paranoia and wars.

DeLillo, a realistic and a living writer who at times seem to be a prophet, to have predicted the falling of the Towers in one of his earlier novels, *The Players*. The cover page of one of his novels, *Under World* published in 1997 has a picture of a black bird flying toward one of the Towers. DeLillo in his essay, "In the Ruins of the Future" writes, "When the towers fell, the moment was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened.... The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile....there is something empty in the sky" (39).

Falling Man is published in the year 2007. *Falling Man* pictures today's world as a mixture of chaos and disorder, which end only in rubble. It records the experiences of the survivors of the demolition of the World Trade Center, back grounding the couple Keith and Lianne. The novel discusses the violent nature of the terrorist portrayed through the mass media. DeLillo's narrative examines the possibilities of reinventing individual identity as well as the tendency of individuals to construct their identities through a group mentality.

The Twin Towers were a symbol of American Pride and Power. Minoru Yamasaki designed the towers and they measured 1,400 feet tall each. September 9, 2001 was the day the whole world was arrested at a moment of dreadful shock. It was a national Apocalypse when the Towers were demolished. It was a wild, unprecedented and unexpected event. The dawn of the day amidst many promises and convergences shattered the belief of "living" and psychologically threatened millions of people. However, day and night, failure and success is the twin mantras people believe in and lead their lives. But the demolition has affected the people's sense of protection. The breathing, which is very customary and unconscious, has become hardened. The entire New York City reels in the aftermath. There are thousands of deaths and thousand more left to mourn. Not only America, but also the entire world witnessed the dangerous moment of living in this world. DeLillo focuses on the compressed and unidentified mental state of the people who are suffering and those who witnessed the event. He turns his characters inside out and exposes the psychological damage that they have suffered beyond the mourning. He shows how various characters attempt to deal with it or, if they cannot deal with it, how they change their lives in order to avoid it. The day is described in the text is as follows:

It was not a street anymore, but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night.... 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 rumbles of the fall. This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, bustling around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall. (3)

People walked through the rubble and mud holding towels to their faces. They ran and even sought refuge under the cars. DeLillo deals the disaster with very minute detail, where the affected psyche of the event lives with no hope. The pathetic situation where the main character Keith, who slightly escapes the disaster, denies accepting his living after the great event is recorded truly. The living and non-living state of Keith is the sum total of millions of people who witnessed the dreadful event. The suffering of Keith is identified to be a Post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. It is a serious potentially debilitating condition that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, sudden death of a loved one, war, violent personal assault such as rape, or other life-threatening events. Most people who experience such events recover from them, but people with PTSD continue to be severely depressed and anxious for months or even years following the event. DeLillo files in *Guernica Magazine* that, "I've always felt that my subject was living in dangerous times."

Peter Knight termed the undercurrents of conspiracy and paranoia exhibited in the text as, "everyday low-intensity paranoia" (45). Jean Baudrillard, criticizes, "Why two towers at the World Trade Center?" (42). For Baudrillard, twin-ness signifies a simulacrum, "the end of any original reference" (43). He continues, "There is, admittedly, in this cloning and perfect symmetry an aesthetic quality, a kind of perfect crime against form, a tautology of form which can give rise, in a violent reaction, to the temptation to break that symmetry, to restore an asymmetry, and hence a singularity" (46).

The story initiates with the rustic smoke of the historic attack and moves to a period of three years and culminates at the same dawn of 9/11. Kaplan, in her *Trauma Cultura*, explains "mediatized trauma" and further explains the effects of trauma, expanding the idea that, "The phenomenon of 9/11 was perhaps the supreme example of a catastrophe that was experienced globally via digital technologies like internet, cell phone as well as by television and radio, and responded to it in a myriad ways depending on peoples' national and local

contexts” (2). It is also the story of one of the survivors of the attacks of the World Trade Centre, Keith Neudecker, a lawyer working in the North Tower. He hardly believes his survival until he meets his wife Lianne. His meeting of Lianne is also accidental because of that accidental attack as they have been separated for years. Lianne, who witnessed the attack on T.V perceives that he too could have been mixed with the debris. Unexpectedly, both wish to unite again and ensue their life further with their son, Justin. However, it seems impossible, because the effect the event creates in their minds is heavy. Trauma survivors who have PTSD may have trouble with their close family relationships or friendships. Their symptoms can cause problems with trust, closeness, communication, and problem solving, which may affect the way the survivor acts with others. In turn, the way a loved one responds to him or her affects the trauma survivor.

Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel is Kristiaan Versluys book about Contemporary American cultural practices. In a chapter Titled “*American Melancholia: Don DeLillo’s Falling Man*”, he explores the trauma of American society after the event, where he comments that, “the terrorist attacks punctuate an era characterized by brokenness and unrelieved melancholia” (21). The attack on the World trade center has been analyzed and interpreted in Jurgen Habermas terms as “first historic world event” (qtd., in Borradori 28). Both the characters experience trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder in different ways. Keith and Lianne represent different types of 9/11 victims. Granofsky relates DeLillo’s *Falling Man* in the connection of collective consciousness, he stresses that, “The collective disaster will, of course, leave its traces on the individual, and the nature of fiction is such that the collective will be portrayed in individual terms” (5). Judith Herman, a psychiatrist explains exactly the human psyche after trauma:

Traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes in psychological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory.... The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion. She may find herself in a constant state of vigilance and irritability without knowing why. (34)

Cathy Caruth, a leading scholar in trauma theory and studies, attempts different texts on psychological aspects of trauma. She writes in her *Unclaimed Experience*:

But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind- the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world- is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred's first infliction.... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (4)

The handicapped state of Keith has been described pathetically by DeLillo in this way, "He tried to tell himself he was alive, but the idea was too obscure to take hold" (6). Keith has gone to the hospital and he is shocked to understand what is "organic shrapnel" (16) that he is found with as explained by the doctor,

In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who's in striking range. Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find this little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel. (16)

Keith literally represents the trauma, though he does not have bumps, he is covered with dust, ash, and blood of the people destroyed in towers. He becomes the physical embodiment of 9/11, representing nothing but chaos and confusion. DeLillo describes the constrained psyche of Keith: "These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man. The fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness" (230).

Understanding what is happening around her and unable to protect Keith and proceed further, Lianne is confused with many things. She questions the system, the society and even God, "What about the people God saved? Are they better people than the ones who died?" (62). No one can answer Lianne's question when she asks,

If he has a heart attack, we blame him. Eats, overeats, no exercise, no common sense. That's what I told the wife. Or he dies of cancer. Smoked and couldn't stop. That was

Mike. If it's cancer, then its lung cancer and we blame him. But this, what happened, its way too big, it's outside someplace, on the other side of the world. You can't get to these people or even see them in their pictures in the paper. You can see their faces, but what does it mean? (64)

Lianne questions the society this way, "You can kill the person in your mind a thousand times.... But here, with these people, you can't even think it" (64). It was difficult for Lianne to erase the memories of the image of falling Towers. Anything that is foreign to Lianne, captures her mind with the images of destruction. Her neighbor Elena is interested in music and whenever she composes music Lianne is reminded of the attack, assuming something related to Islam and terrorism. She warns Elena vehemently not at all bothering about breaking relations.

This trauma has awakened another likely distress that Lianne experienced in the unexpected suicide of her father Jack Glenn. Lianne wishes to read and connect whatever she reads with the 9/11 event. The Alzheimer's patients with whom Lianne works also symbolizes falling men and women. When their disease advances, they too crumble down. Through her service to the Alzheimer's group, while reading about the attacks, she links it with her father. Her trauma mounts heavily linking each other. DeLillo is much worried about the children living amidst such catastrophes. This view is reflected in the novel too. Justin the son of Keith and Lianne always plays with the twin kids in the neighbourhood. Isabel, the mother of the kids worried about the children spending a lot of time looking at the sky for the fall of Twin Towers. They even believe Bill Lawton mistaken to Bin Laden has the power to poison their food and kill them. Next in the list is the "Falling Man", a performance artist who is described thus:

Unannounced, in various parts of the city, suspended from one or other structure, always upside down, wearing a suit, a tie and dress shoes. He brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump. He'd been seen dangling from a balcony in a hotel atrium and police had escorted him out of a concert hall and two or three apartment buildings with terraces or accessible rooftops. (33)

This performance once again collects all the fears and trauma of Lianne. She happens to see his performance twice. Witnessing the performance is not a representation but the

attack itself. Three years later Lianne reads Janiak, the performance artist's obituary and recalls that he, "intended to reflect the body posture of a particular man who was photographed falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Center" (221). After this, Lianne started understanding that her father committed suicide because he could not live with his Alzheimer's disease. Laura Frost comments, "Disturbing as they are, images of 9/11's falling bodies.... The falling people represent the national trauma of 9/11 in ways that are particularly difficult to understand, mourn, and assimilate" (182- 183). At last, she finds peace one day while sitting in church as seen in the following lines:

It was not something godlike she felt, but only a sense of others. Others bring us closer. Church brings us closer. What did she feel here? She felt the dead, hers and unknown others.... She felt the dead in the walls, over decades and centuries. There was no dispiriting chill in this. It was a comfort, feeling their presence, the dead, she'd loved and all the faceless others who'd filled a thousand churches. They brought intimacy and ease, the human ruins that lie in crypts and vaults or buried in churchyard plots. (233-34)

Lianne decides to move on with the world with Justin after witnessing her mother Nina's demise. But she has no guts to take Keith, a melancholic to share her life. Keith's suffering is doubled since he witnesses the death of his close friend, Rumsey. He guesses something bad of Rumsey and reaches his office. Rumsey's coffee mug was shattered in his hand. He still holds a fragment of the mug, his finger through the ring (241). He had been hit by something large and hard, his face was pressed into his shoulder. Keith talks to him, "He squatted alongside and took his arm and looked at the man, talking to him. Something came trickling from the corner of Rumsey's mouth, an indentation, a gouge mark, deep, exposing the raw tissue and nerve" (241). The last few pages of the novel explain clearly the Falling towers,

Debris in clusters came down now. There were echoes sounding down the floors and wires snapping at his face and white paper everywhere. He stood through it, holding Rumsey. The glass partition shattered. Something came down and there was a noise and then the glass shivered and broke and then the wall gave way behind him. It took some time to push himself up and out. His face felt like a hundred pinpoint fires and it was hard to breathe. (242)

Trauma is the after effect of the event on September 11. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association, included in its official annual of mental disorders a new category, called “post-traumatic stress disorder.” The affected people are identified to have symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder. This makes the people to think of themselves as weak and powerless. The psychiatrist Judith Herman, in her text “Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror”, explains that “psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force... Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (33). Keith started thinking “they would all be dead one day” (228).

Keith could not recognize himself as he has fragmented identity. He attempts to establish his identity but turns ineffective. He has become a constructed human being almost alienated, unable to connect or be linked with others, disconnected from reality, suffers a lot, not knowing what to do. It is written thus about him: “Nothing seemed familiar, being here, in a family again, and he felt strange to himself, or always had, but it was different now because he was watching” (65). Keith’s condition is equal to Alzheimer patients who are attended by Lianne. Their mental deterioration emphasizes the importance of healthy memory for an individual to sustain his identity. Alzheimer patients’ minds are, “beginning to slide away from the friction that makes an individual possible” (30).

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crisiss of Witnessing in literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, registers the opinion about the world historical moment as,

The Age of Testimony...an age whose writing task is to confront the horror of its own destructiveness, to attest to the unthinkable disaster of culture’s breakdown, and to attempt to assimilate the massive trauma, and the cataclysmic shift in being that resulted, within some reworked frame of culture or within some revolutionized order of consciousness. (114)

People could not accept the most conspicuous missing of the World Trade Center easily. They try to compare the present as life after the event. Lianne comments, “These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after” (138). Lianne tries to accept the reality and the philosophy of carry on and move on to the available. She started her life again with the support of religion and practical wisdom. However, Keith could not find comfort and consolation from any of the available sources. He longs to meet Florence, another survivor of

the attack whose identity was revealed to Keith through the suitcase he carries when he rises from the rubble. He longs to see her, to be with her and so his life remains a static position, unable to be accelerated by any force. Keith explains:

She talked about the tower, going over it again, claustrophobically, the smoke, the fold of the bodies, and he understood that they could talk about these things only with each other in minute and dullest detail, but it would never be dull or too detailed because it was inside of them now and because he needed to hear what he'd lost in the tracings of memory. This was their pitch of delirium, the dazed reality they'd shared in the stairwells, the deep shafts of spiraling men and women. (91)

Except trauma, nothing is common between Keith and Florence. It was the trauma that brings them together and comforts Keith a little. Certainly the 9/11 attack has made a change with people's belief in life. Lianne resorts to the union with God to further her living in this dreadful world. The fragmented Keith finds no solution. Keith is not the only one fragmented identity; there are multiple fragmented souls with no identity after the events. Undoubtedly, faith, harmony, and peace lost its face with the rubbles of the fallen Towers.

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