



## CONTESTING HISTORY AND FRACTURING GRAND NARRATIVE THROUGH EKPHRISIS: ANALYSING 9/11 IN DON DELILLO'S *FALLING MAN*

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### ABSTRACT



In the "Culture of Postmodernism" Ihab Hassan acknowledges that the current age bears the acceptance "to apprehend history as theory, theory as literature, and literature as both history and theory" and which, is the crux of postmodernism. Postmodern thinkers believe that the metier of the contemporary artists is to question the role of metanarratives that seek to homogenize and legitimize certain paradigms. In doing so, they create space for the marginalized and the oppressed. The boundary between history and literature has effaced and given birth to what Linda Hutcheon calls as "Historiographic Metafiction." American writer Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), with its focus on 9/11, juxtaposes marginalised forms of identity and behaviour of the other with American sense of Exceptionalism, thus assigning space to every voice. The author attempts to subvert the bombardment of images of the 9/11 provided by the mass media with the unannounced performances of an artist called, "Falling Man." The paper attempts to analyse the author's ways in which his novel works as a historiographic metafiction along with the device of ekphrasis to keep the inclusion of mainstream culture at bay and prevent from making 9/11 as another grand narrative.

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism, Ekphrasis, Grandnarrative, Historiographic Metafiction.*

### Citation:

**APA** Farhat, B. (2018) Contesting History and Fracturing Grand Narrative through Ekphrasis: Analysing 9/11 in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(1), 68-75.

**MLA** Farhat, Bazila. "Contesting History and Fracturing Grand Narrative through Ekphrasis: Analysing 9/11 in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.5, no.1, 2018, pp.68-75.

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In the “Culture of Postmodernism” Ihab Hassan acknowledges that the current age bears the acceptance “to apprehend history as theory, theory as literature, and literature as both history and theory” and which, he observes, is the crux of postmodernism. Postmodern thinkers believe that the metier of the contemporary artists is to question the role of metanarratives that seek to homogenize and legitimize certain paradigms. In doing so, they create space for the marginalized and the oppressed and herald a pluralistic age. The relationship between history and literature is quite intriguing in the light of postmodernism, especially when its thinkers don't believe in any unique and reliable truth. In other words, the boundary between history and literature has effaced and given birth to what Linda Hutcheon calls as “Historiographic Metafiction.” As a self-conscious writing, it aims to investigate the status of writing as fiction as well as to question the general perception of the relation between fiction, reality and truth. American writer Don DeLillo (1936-) has written substantial works that are read under the genre of historiographic metafiction. His fourteenth novel, *Falling Man* (2007), with its focus on 9/11, tracks the lives of a dysfunctional family of a survivor, Keith Neudecker, and a group of jihadis, and also depicts the relationship between their disconnected lives and the rest of the world. Written in the third person, the novel juxtaposes marginalised forms of identity and behaviour of the other with American sense of Exceptionalism, thus assigning space to every voice. The author, being aware that history is just a cultural construct—a human discourse, subverts the bombardment of images of the 9/11 provided by the mass media in an incessant loop with the unannounced performances of an artist called, “Falling Man”, which resists the commodification of the event of 9/11. The paper attempts to analyse the author's ways in which his novel works as a historiographic metafiction to keep the inclusion of mainstream culture at bay and prevent from making 9/11 as another grand-narrative.

The event of 9/11, along with its causes and consequences, find aesthetic representation in the novel in which DeLillo merges the critical and controversial facts with narrative constructions. He seems to be more observant of the search of the

truth rather than the palpable truth itself and more cautious to put questions rather than to seek answers. By depicting the protagonist trapped in the smoky and crumbling tower the writer focuses on what could have happened. The novel reads:

The tower began a long sway left and he raised his head. He took his head out of his knees to listen. He tried to be absolutely still and tried to breathe and tried to listen. . . . In time he felt the tower stop leaning. The lean felt forever and impossible and he sat and listened and after a while the tower began to roll slowly back. . . . When the tower swung finally back to the vertical he pushed himself off the floor and moved to the doorway. The ceiling at the far end of the hall moaned and opened. The stress was audible and then it opened, objects coming down, panels and wall-board. . . . He felt things come and go. (240)

By blending the past with fiction the author effaces the boundaries between the fact and the fiction and achieves for herself/himself a free hand whereby she/he can rework and dramatize the past. This is what Linda Hutcheon has called historiographic metafiction. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, she defines the historiographic metafiction as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also claim to historical events and personages” (5). In contrast to this tormenting experience faced by the protagonist the novel also depicts the mediated images of the event being run in an incessant loop by the media. Such mediated images and words form a narrative that not only snatches the past of its objective angle but represents it as something constructed and makes history a grandnarrative.

DeLillo wants to puncture the grandnarrative of mass media through the counternarrative presented in the novel. As Hutcheon maintains, “Postmodern fiction suggests to rewrite or to represent the past in fiction and in history, is in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological”



(110). For this purpose, DeLillo in the novel uses free indirect speech or sometimes interior monologue, whereby the narrator effortlessly shifts attention to and from various characters. This allows the inclusion of multiple perspectives and spaces thus breaking the scope of totalizing or homogenizing narratives. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short in *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (2007) analyze speech and thought process at work in a fiction like *Falling Man*. They present a cline or continuum for speech and thought in which both the narrator and the character are in control on either side of the extremes. In the novel, as noted by Stephenie Morgan,

[W]here thought is concerned movement away from narratorial control allows the reader to experience the mind-set of the character involved, thus creating empathy. When considering speech, a category of particular importance in Hammad's story, movement towards the narrator's grasp has a distancing effect, generating ideological estrangement. (35)

Through *Falling Man* DeLillo explores the relationship among images, words, and politics that arose in the post 9/11 America. He analyses the impact of visual representation of the arts on the individual as well as culture by employing the literary device of ekphrasis. Derived from the Greek word, ekphrasis (where "ek" means for the sake of and "phradzin" means, speaks or points out) is the verbal description of a fictional or real work of art produced as a rhetorical device. As a rhetorical device, it expresses one medium of art through another by exploring its characteristics and form. Critic, Peter Schneck, analyses DeLillo's visual poetics in the novel acquire a central rhetorical function that remains in all of his novels invariably. Schneck, in "To See Things before Other People See Them: Don DeLillo's Visual Poetics" postulates that through the debate among the fictional characters about the effects of images and "images that speak for themselves" (105), DeLillo's novels "challenge the readers'—often unconscious—knowledge of a more general and

universal system of visual signification or, more precisely, a cultural iconography" (105). The reading of the novel as an apparatus of the strategies of ekphrasis tends to explore the manipulation of physical body and visual arts as a means of artistic expression and as a form of communication. The device of ekphrasis offers the reading of the novel where the visual representations through the medium of Giorgio Morandi's *Natura morta*, the Italian term for still life paintings, and the performances of the artist, David Janiak is set against the gamut of authentic mediated images of 9/11 and responses attached to it. The ekphratic nature of the novel is condensed in a dialogue between Keith's wife, Lianne and her mother's lover, Martin aka, Ernest Hechinger thus:

"People read poems. People I know, they read poetry to ease the shock and pain, give them a kind of space, something beautiful in language," she said, "to bring comfort or composure. I don't read poems. I read newspapers. I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy."

"There's another approach, which is to study the matter. Stand apart and think about the elements," he said. "Coldly, clearly if you're able to. Do not let it tear you down. See it, measure it." (42)

The fictional characters try to find a source to vent out the effect of the shock brought about by 9/11. DeLillo, through the device of ekphrasis, shows the fictional characters going through a therapeutic process. When Lianne witnesses the performance of the falling man she revises the event of 9/11 differently as what was shown on the television. The performance of DeLillo's falling man renders Lianne's body limp. She felt something awful in his frozen pose and during one of the performances, she was so near to him that: "She could have spoken to him but that was another plane of being, beyond reach" (168). When Lianne learns about his untimely death from natural causes, she looks up the artist on the internet where she finds his pictures—dangling from the balcony of an apartment, suspended from the



roof of a loft building, sometimes dangling from the flies at a hall during a concert, from a bridge over a river, and from the bell tower. DeLillo renders his falling man execute the same performances, thus blatantly redeeming what was banned for being insensitive. With reference to this, Setha Lowe in "The Memorialization of September 11: Dominant and Local Discourses on the Rebuilding of the World Trade Center Site" comments that performances by DeLillo's falling man are not as much the fictionalization of Drew's photograph and its controversy as much a method to induce a series of visual representation of bodies that grew to be stimulating in the post 9/11 memorial debate (332). DeLillo's falling man seems to transmogrify the fragility of human body into a performance in a public sphere. Through the device of ekphrasis, the fictional performance of Janiak stands boldly in contrast to Richard Drew's photograph of a victim of 9/11 who had jumped out of one of the burning and collapsing towers. Devin P. Zuber in "9/11 as Memento Mori: Still-Life and Image in Don DeLillo's Ekphrastic Fiction" comments:

DeLillo's Janiak is set up as resistant to the photographic image and the whole market apparatus of medaization that allows a single performance, a fall, to become a visual commodity bought and sold on the art market. Janiak is described as a romantic, an artist who believes in a kind of aesthetic autonomy of his work that stands apart from the hubris of politics. (209)

Janiak is a reclusive artist who refuses to speak about his performances. Every time Lianne sees his performances she observes the absence of photographers to cover such an astonishing sight and the presence of an unexpected crowd, perplexed by his sudden spectacular fall. The impact of this encounter is so indelible on her that for years she remembers it. DeLillo depicts Lianne's reaction on finding David Janiak's picture on the internet after three years of her last encounter with him thus:

She clicked forward. She tried to connect this man to the moment

when she'd stood beneath the elevated tracks, nearly three years ago, watching someone prepare to fall from a maintenance platform as the train went past. There were no photographers of that fall. She was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb. (223)

Her encounter with the performance of Janiak has generated a transcendental awe in her, as compared to looking at the pictures, images, photographs of 9/11 on the television, or in the newspapers or magazines that would make her "get angry and crazy" (42). If Janiak's performances stand as a forceful interposition into the discourse of 9/11, "DeLillo's recurrent use of semi-obscure Italian post-Impressionist seems initially oblique" (210). On first reading of the conversation between Martin and Lianne, where both of them think that they can see the towers in the still life paintings of Morandi, the connection between the still life paintings and the psychological effect of 9/11 seems illogical.

They looked together.

Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them pretty concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to.

"What do you see?" he said.

She saw what he saw. She saw the towers. (49)

Critics like Cathy Caruth and Kristiaan Versluys study the passage as having psychological import. They, particularly, note that the passage tends to reveal the aftermaths of trauma. Martin and Lianne, by connecting the event with aesthetic painting of Morandi, attempt to impart unity and a memory to the implicit and inert effects of the trauma. However, it can be safely established that a writer like DeLillo holds the mettle to employ the still life artfully, to achieve an esoteric purpose. If the still life paintings are appraised vis-à-vis post 9/11 discourse, the effect



of Morandi paintings on Martin and Lianne can be seen more than just a psychological study. Art historian Norman Bryson explains, "Still life is the world minus its narrative, or better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest" (60). Thus the broken narrative chronology of the novel aligns with the narrative form of still life paintings. Morandi's creativity to convert quotidian objects into an architectural monumentality is described by Piero Pacini in "Morandi Giorgio" as:

...the most ordinary shapes, such as pots, bottles, and boxes, come to take on a further meaning here. They become impressive either because of their potential monumentality, which gave them the mysterious and elusive aura of a cathedral, or because their allusions took the viewer by surprise or gradually became apparent. Sometimes reality was as if spellbound, and the objects conveyed a sense of timelessness. (web)

The reference of Morandi paintings throughout the novel makes a different statement when removed from the frame of time. Thus what Martin and Lianne see in the still life is not just a projected effect of trauma and mediated images they keep seeing in the media but visceral response to the subject matter of Morandi's paintings themselves.

Joseph M. Conte in "Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror" notes, "DeLillo repeatedly invoked the World Trade Center as representative of the gigantism and hubris of global capitalism, a force that he stridently resisted from the start of his career in *Americana*, in which the television executive David Bell, abandons his unfulfilling job in New York City" (562). *Falling Man* exposes DeLillo's transnational political investigation through its fictional characters who often get into discussions and debates on the *raison d'être* of the event throughout the novel. DeLillo points out that at the dawn of the millennium the world narrative belonged to American culture that held the power to penetrate every wall of every home and every mind of every life. This was certainly made possible on

account of western technology and cyber-capitalism. The attack of 9/11 was an act of resistance to the cultural imperialism through western media, technology, and capitalism. When Martin, Nina Bartos' lover comes to America after the event, they both start debating over the reason of the attack. While Nina feels that religion is the basic cause that prompts the terrorist attacks, Martin believes that the American society provokes the jihadis. It is the invincibility of America and blatant interference of the American culture into their culture that spites them (46). The blow of 9/11, as maintained by Martin, was 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" (46). Martin and Nina keep challenging each other's standpoints in the following conversations:

Forget God. These are the matters of history. This is politics and economics. All these things that shape lives, millions of people, disposed, their lives, their consciousness.

It's not the history of Western interference that pulls them 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.

They use the language of religion, okay, but this is not what drives them.

Panic, this is what drives them. (47)

The debate explores ideological reasons behind the attack that range from capitalist exploitation by America in the era of globalization to the burgeoning religious panic of the Middle East. DeLillo's political insinuations become even more conspicuous with the unraveling of the perspective of the fictional terrorist, Hammad. Through the character of Hammad and his leader Amir, DeLillo implies that the terrorists see the West as twisted and hypocrite nation, "determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds" (79). They feel that America controls their world and it deserves to be destroyed.



No wonder that Conte views the Twin Towers as egregious symbols of American capitalism and market economy and maintains that they have always been indifferent to humanity (563). As an answer to this indifference, there has been a latent longing, America's libidinal fantasy of destruction which Slavoj Žižek in "Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblence" contends is libidinally constructed by America's cultural imagery. He claims:

Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested – just remember the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. That is the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise. (15-16)

The fantasy of the fall of the towers, as mentioned by Žižek, as the cultural imagery existed as a safe displacement for fears, lusts, and taboos present in the American society. The actual fall of the towers is an instance of what Lyotard calls as a "the unrepresentable" while defining postmodernism. Jean Baudrillard in the essay "The Spirit of the Terrorism" (2001) also iterates Žižek's postulation and continues to make even more controversial claim that the terrorists answered a fantasy upheld by the attacked system of capitalism. The towers were the incarnations of the American capitalist system which was the primary target of the terrorists. Žižek's argument regarding libidinal fantasy and Baudrillard's provocative suggestion is recapitulated by Martin Ridnour:

Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What

other reason would there be to go so high and then double it do it twice. It's a fantasy, so why not do it twice. You are saying, Here it is, bring it down. (116)

Similar view is presented in the essay, "In the Ruins of the Future" written right after 9/11, DeLillo enunciates the troubling probe that every American undertakes regarding the crime America did to incite such catastrophe. He enlists America's culture and modernity, technology, secularism, democracy etc that gave rise to incongruity between the Americans and rest of the world. Giovanna Borradori, in the introduction to her edited set of dialogues with Habermas and Derrida, puts across the view which places the current age of terrorism against the technologically oriented future anticipated by the West. She affirms that the ideology of the terrorists responsible for the attacks of 9/11 rejects the projects of modernity and secularization. Borradori records:

While for Habermas terrorism is the effect of the trauma of modernization, which has spread around the world at a pathological speed, Derrida sees terrorism as a symptom of a traumatic element intrinsic to modern experience, whose focus is always on the future, somewhat pathologically understood as promise, hope, and self-affirmation. Both are somber reflections on the legacy of the Enlightenment: the relentless search for a critical perspective that must start with self-examination. (22)

In the western world, the project of Enlightenment paved way to Modernism which centred its focus on the power of reason, and other ideals like liberty, progress, tolerance, democracy, and secularization. It consolidated the dominance of the Western Society over the rest of the world. However, this thought and theory did not come without some of its impediments. The modernization of the western world gave rise to industrialization, urbanization, democratization, and secularization which led to



breaking up of community, the erosion of religious values in the Western society along with its continuous drift towards alienation and anomie that eventually gave rise to mass society. All these principle changes in the western society expanded the gap between it and the rest of the world. DeLillo critiques all the investment America has done till now on social, political, and economic level, especially. Viewing 9/11 as symptomatic of resistance, he clubs the perpetrators with:

The protestors of Genoa, Prague, Seattle and other cities want to decelerate the global momentum that seemed to be driving unthinkingly toward a landscape of consumer-robots and social instability, with the chance of self-determination probably diminishing for most people in most countries. Whatever acts of violence marked the protests, most of the men and women involved tend to be moderating influence, trying to slow things down, even things out, hold off the white-hot future. (Ruins 33)

As an acute observer of life at its elemental level, the novelist expresses a deep desire of an apparently future obsessed American society to slow down. There is an emphasis on an objective and distanced measurement of life as well as its events, something which is possible only when it moves at a comprehensibly slow speed. It is in this context DeLillo writes that "the terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past" (34). While DeLillo believes that the event "has no purchase on the mercies of analogy and simile" (39) as 9/11 cannot be compared to any historical event, he is cautious not to represent the violence of 9/11 with misinterpreted reality. He doesn't want his literary response to 9/11 fall into any ideological framework. In the novel, Martin asks Lianne to examine 9/11 by studying it. "Stand apart and think about the elements," he said. "Coldly, clearly if you're able to. Do not let it tear you down. See it, measure it" (42). DeLillo seems to recognize the dilemma of an American fiction writer to respond critically to such a catastrophe while

maintaining an unbiased and objective approach. He believes that a writer has a moral responsibility while understanding such an event. This is why, after the attacks DeLillo claims to have taken a long pause from writing. Slavoj Žižek, in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* examines that while analyzing any sort of violence one needs to step back from the "fascinating lure" (1) of the violence: "A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and promote tolerance" (1). One should rather understand the conditions that generated the violence:

There are reasons for looking at the problem of violence awry...the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking. A *dispassionate* conceptual development of the typology of violence must by definition ignore its traumatic impact. (4)

He outlines the potential latent risk in writing about violence, because any direct association with violence may inhibit critical analysis. He provides twofold warning against the excessive as well as too little empathy: a study that is too passionate directs to passionate involvement with the victims, obstructing neutral understanding whereas a study that is too detached discounts the horrific power of the violent event and agony of victims.

DeLillo uses the motif of "falling man" to send across the message, loud and clear, that art is the only square response to the events of the magnitude like 9/11. Telling the 'event' as well as its ramifications from multiple narrative perspectives, the novelist has appropriated the responses of common Americans in the face of 9/11 and transformed them into seemingly first-hand experience. The centre have been viewed a severe attack on America's global economic hegemony, American Exceptionalism, the country as a super power and her supposed unique place in the world. DeLillo also succeeds, in the character of Keith, in pointing out the ennui that the American materialistic pursuits have created in the lives of her people. By the narrative perspective of Americans



like Keith and Lianne or that of the hijacker, Hammad, DeLillo has laid bare the very elemental human characteristics and established that the differences are created by politics, wrong religious indoctrinations and division between first, second and third world.

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