Enhancing Islamophobia in Post 9/11 American Novel: DeLillo's Falling Man as a Case Study

د. خطاب محمد احمد

كلية الاداب جامعة تكريت

Abstract

The present study is an attempt to discuss the controversial issue of Islamophobia in the West which is empowered after 9/11 attacks. Undoubtedly, that terrorist event has shocked the American society with its bloody nature targeting innocent civilians. Yet, it has been exploited by politicians and some American writers to form a corrupted image of Islam as the real enemy to the Western civilization and modernity. DeLillo's *Falling Man* is one of the post 9/11 American novels which contributed effectively in the image-making of Islam as the source of threat to the West.

1. Introduction

The attack ofSeptember 11, 2001 in the United States, commonly known as 9/11, is considered as one of the most casualties of terrorist attacks in modern history. The result of that tragic event was not only the destruction of the tallest buildings in Manhattan; it also demolishedthe image of the American nation as the greatest and unbeatable power in the world.America has now a new but not traditional enemy which makes it difficult to identify or define; that is terrorism. However, the common attitude of the politicians, scholars, mass media activists and writerstowardsthat phenomenon was to connect it solely with Islam and Muslims. Thus, the aim of this paper is to uncover DeLillo'ssoft incitation against Islam as a threat to America and Muslims as potential terrorists as manifested in his novel *Falling Man*.

2. 9/11: a Shock to the West

That terrorist attack had changed the course of history to the extent that some people used to make a sharp distinction between pre-9/11 world and post-9/11 world. That tragic scene has been effectively imaged by Cvek when he said: "The instantly and repeatedly broadcast images of the planes hitting the towers and the tall buildings collapsing soon became a symbolic stand-in for the tragic loss of that day" (Cvek 2).Though it targeted America, it had global implications too. As the attackers came from outside America; the planners are very far from America; even the victims belong to many countries, the direct response of the American government was to declare a global war on terrorism which later resulted in US war against Afghanistan and Iraq. But its impact on the western context was profoundly deeper not only politically, but also on the cultural, ideological, social and economic levels. America's dignity as the super power in the world, the highest representative of the modern civilization and the supposed guardian of human rights, was injured by a group of young Muslims who belonged to Al-Qaida group in the Orient. The majority of the American people who usually are not involved in politics were shocked and perplexed, raising tens of questions: what, who, where, why, etc. But what they had in common was their call for direct and fast revenge. They blindly supported their government in attacking Afghanistan and Iraq and chasing Al-Qaida members everywhere until they caught Bin Laden. This trend in American could be shown clearly when we read the common people's response to the news of killing the first wanted terrorist Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaida. The scene is beautifully imaged by Gaj Tomas when he says: When the news broke out that the military successfully neutralized the most wanted terroristssince the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, there was a wave of excitement, thrill,tears and patriotic riots in front of the White House. The Washington Post reports severalthousands of young Americans rushing to the fence of the White House, in a spontaneous displayof jubilation, dancing and cheering 'USA! (1)

They celebrated Bin Laden's death even in their T-shirts. It seems that "relief flooded through the American world, even in the euphoric moment, as if they have been searching for some crumb of comfort, or partial closure ever since that awfulmorning of 9/11" (Tomas 1).

The trauma of the event caused the thinkers and policymakers to reevaluate America's values, laws and relationship with the Other. It inspired the writers not, only in America, but all over the world to produce thousands of poems, essays, novels, films …etc. in their attempts to present, criticize and analyze the causes and results of the most shocking event in the 21st century. The effect of that tragic event on the writers and artists was profound and impressive. They showed a multiple and extremely contrasting types of feelings. Their first response could be marked with what Jniyene called 'a failure of words' (13). American writers were in the situation that they have to confront the fact of their duty to "voice the silence and narrate the events as they evolved in a series of images of destruction, dust and the sublime "falling man", which symbolically expressed the ruin of the imagined "American innocence". Haunted by those images, these writers sought redemption and relief" (13).

3. Islamophobia in Post 9/11 American Literature

In a definite fruitful article entitled: "Representation of Islam in Post 9/11 English Novels" (2015), Alireza and Abolfazl listed 31 novels directly related to 9/11 attacks dividing them into eight groups based on the

angles from which they had looked at 9/11 event. In my reading of table 2 in that paper entitled "Post 9/11 novel writers attitude toward dominant discourse", I found that almost all the western novels listed in the table have enforced the common trend that closely and solely associated terrorism with Islam and supported directly or indirectly the bloody revenge against the Muslim world under the slogan of 'fighting terrorism'. The only exception, here, is The Writing on the Wall (2006) by Lynne Sharon Schwartz which focuses on the miserable consequences ofthe 9/11attacks on domestic and global classification. Undoubtedly, post 9/11 western literature has played a significant role in the process of imaging Islam as the representation of terrorism. Ignoring the social, cultural, economic, political and ideological dimensions of terrorism which, actually, make it one of the most challenging concepts to define, Western media and literature has shown Islam as the religion of terrorism and Muslims, in general, are potential terrorists. This continuous and, may be, deliberate campaign has created the atmosphere of what is academically now called 'Islamphobia'.

Artfully, Mustafa Buyukgebiz makes a parallelism between the fear of communism and Islamophobia in the Western world. According to him, both of them resulted from the ashes of war and attacks and "used as political tools" (229). He confirms that Western media has a vital role creating Islamophobia: "Western media serves as a propaganda tower against Islam and Muslims. Islam is portrayed as a global threat for humanity and the source of terrorism. Even entertainment programmes such as talk shows in America have islamophobic attitudes and messages" (232).The influential interrelationship between the imaginative and fictional world created by the writers and the actual and real world of the society is interchangeable. This is evidently reflected in post 9/11 America. Most American writers were driven by the impact of the common discourse of the society which was emphasized by the political leaders under the slogan 'war against terrorism'. Thus, the novelists with their patriotic passion indulged themselves to that war as part of their duty to protect America from a savage enemy. The result was, taking whatever said against Islam for granted without any attempt to question their authenticity, motives, purposes, or sources.

4. Implication of the Setting in Falling Man

Chapter one in Falling Man can be taken as one of the best descriptive memorial of the 9/11 horrible attacks. It, beautifully, creates an atmosphere very close to what the readers may imagine while reading about that event. Giving attention to every small detail, DeLillo was skillful enough to use words as images and videos and go deeper to describe the physical and psychological shock of the people. He has applied the postmodern technique of 'metafiction' which mixes the real with unreal and the actual with fictional. He himself pointed out that 9/11 was unbelievable, unexpected and seemed to be unreal. This is inferred from what he once stated in his essay "In the Ruinsof the Future" 2001: "The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated themedium. It was bright and totalising and some of us said it was unreal. When wesay a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable andyet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of ourperceptions" (Cited in Panzani 81). Through his use of metafiction technique which is a contemporary avant-garde, DeLillowants to say that the real is now unreal or too real to be imaged by the conventional and straightforward narrative. With this postmodern technique, he frees the narrative of the novel to jump back and forth unmethodically. He also introducesunnamed characters, which makes it difficult for the readers to recognize who is the speaker or the listener and the conversations between the characters seem abstract and ambiguous.

DeLillo opens his novel with a shocking description of the street near World Trade Center at the time of explosion on 9/11/2000: "It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space offalling ash and near night" (3). Keith Neudecker, the protagonist, was there; one of the survivors and witnesses. He was walking through rubble and mud observing frightened people everywhere around him. He was "a measure, an instrument that testifies to the tragedy'simmensity, the one most affected by it" (Tomas 4). He saw people running and falling and "some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming downaround them, and there were people taking shelter under cars" (DeLillo 3).

The narrator goes on to describe the horrible situation in a way that makes it unforgettable and invites the reader to live the experience: "This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling downstreets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismictides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheetswith cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly thingsin the morning pall" (3).

In less than four pages DeLillo was able to set the ground for the psychological, social, ideological, cultural and political consequences that will be profoundly discussed in the other chapters of the novel. Hence, chapter one is the logical shift from pre-9/11 America to post-9/11 America, the falling America which is symbolically represented in the titled as 'falling man'. There is another symbol of falling, death and destruction yet to be

referred to in chapter one: "There was something else then, outside all this, not belongingto this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came downout of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant lightand then falling again, down toward the river" (4).

5. Social and Psychological Impact of 9/11 attack on Americans

The critical and awful impact of 9/11 attacks is represented in Falling Man in two directions. Firstly, the social and psychological trauma which is symbolized in Keith's family. Secondly, the hostile and bitter feeling against Arabs and Muslims. The first aspect will be discussed briefly to set the ground for the major focus of this research paper that is 'Islamophobia' showing how the American writers exploited the common people's true feelings of despair and loss to direct them, implicitly or explicitly, to the situation of hatred and revenge against Islam and Muslims. The characters in Falling Man feel miserable and insignificance after the terrorist attacks. Their world is broken and the future seems vague and horrible. This is what Bob Batchelor may refer to when he stated: DeLillo creates characters that stand in for the wash of emotion the nation feltfollowing the terrorist attacks. Keith, the survivor, represents victimization. Hecopes but is out of sync with those around him, basically falling into monotonous trance. The routine he develops gives a mechanism to survive, but he is too emotionally wired to manage. Lianne symbolizes the fear that gripped the nation. She sees terror all around her and searches for answers in the deaths and destruction, but she cannot look away, even as 9/11 tightens its hold on her. (180) Though so many writers have tried to portray sufficiently and profoundly the effect that the 9/11 attacks had on ordinary people, DeLillo was distinguished with his focus on the social shock it caused. He selected a family to represent the American community's trauma after that horrible scene. Rosie Partington, in his essay, "Disconnectedness is the new currency':Falling Man, sympathy and Text-world Theory" (2010-2011), pointed out: "Avoiding a temptation to give intooverblown sentimentality or tear-jerking pity, DeLillo's novel creates a sensation ofnumbness and leaves the reader feeling profoundly unsettled" (309). Keith Neudecker, the protagonist of the novel, escapes from the collapsing World Trade Center, unconsciously, addressing himself towards the house of his family, wife and son, after a long time of separation. It comes as a great surprise to Lianne, his wife, and her mother. He is considered by Gaj Thomas as "a measure, an instrument that testifies to the tragedy'simmensity, the one most affected by it. Keith becomes a register for the world in its making, andstill bluntly unaware of it, with just a hint of a symbol yet to be defined" (4).Keith's continuous meetings with friends to play poker, was the closest way to escape the trauma. It became a routine which he would not stop even if he is lonely. His wife Lianne observed his loss and scattering when she says: He was a hovering presence now. There drifted through therooms a sense of someone who has earned respectful attention.He was not quite returned to his body yet. Even the program ofexercises he did for his postsurgical wrist seemed a littledetached, four times a day, an odd set of extensions and flexionsthat resembled prayer in some remote northern province, amonga repressed people, with periodic applications of ice. (DeLillo 59)

Thus,even though Keith was one of the survivors of the attacks of 9/11 with no major injuries, he was traumatized as he witnessed so many deaths, especially his own friend, Rumsey.

Lianne, on the other hand, had no less feeling of despair and fear. She used her work as a freelance editor and counsellor to a group of Alzheimer patients to escape her disturbing life. She tried to overcome her traumatic past with an attempt to recreate events and memories. When she met DrApter, who treats the patients, she declared her wish to "to increase the frequency of the meetings totwice a week " (DeLillo 60), he said that it is a mistake. Referring to her psychological disturbance he added:

You don't want them to feel there's anurgency to write everything, say everything before it's too late.You want them to look forward to this, not feel pressed or threatened.The writing is sweet music up to a point. Then otherthings will take over."He looked at her searchingly.

"What I'm saying is simple. This is for them," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's theirs," he said. "Don't make it yours." (60)

6. Representation of Islamophobia in Falling Man

As referred above, the second aspect of the impact of 9/11 attacks on the Western society in general and American society in particular as represented in Falling Man is the negative attitude towards Islam as the source of terrorism and the unquestioning feeling of hatred and animosity against Muslims which caused a sort of discrimination not only against the Arab and Muslim Worlds but also those who live in the west whether citizens or immigrants. This gives the event the transnational nature which creates "a complex response, including questions of conflict between Islam and the West" (Grant 1). Edward Said believes that
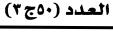
thepersistent"extremely negative images [of Arabs and Islam]: the stereotypes of lustful, vengeful, violent, irrational, fanatical people" became more prevalent after 9/11 (Cited in Grant 24).

DeLillo and other post-9/11 writers have enhanced the attitude of conflating Islam with terrorism. However, what distinguishes Dellilo in Falling Man from other writers, who dealt with the same topic, is his intentional attempt to avoid being accused of the oriental perspective of evaluating the causes and consequences of the event. He, skillfully, tries to enfold the negative attitude, he shares with his fellows against Islam, with the cover of the humanitarian analysis of the characters of the terrorists.

In the novel, there are two Muslim characters, two members of the terrorist group who attacked the Twin Towers, namely, Hammad and Amir. Though Amir is the leader of the group, he is given a minor, but significant, role in the novel. In fact, DeLillo uses the character of Hammad to represent Islam as the motive for fool, hesitant and somewhat innocent humans to be ready for death, ready to be terrorists.

The novel is divided into three parts; the title of each part has an illusion of the trauma of the terrorist attacks. Part One's title is 'Bill Lawton' which is a misnomer for Bin Laden by Austin, the son of Keith, and his friends who together developed the myth of Bill Lawton which is summed up by Keith: "He has a long beard. He wears a long robe," … He flies jet planes and speaks thirteen languages but not Englishexcept to his wives. What else? He has the power to poison whatwe eat but only certain foods. They're working on the list."" (DeLillo 74). Keith was happy with this type of stereotyping which he thought was the good result of their efforts to put "a protective distancebetween children and news events…mass murderers" (74). The title of Part Two is 'Ernst Hechinger', the lover of Lianne's mother. Though the family confesses that he was a German terrorist, he is not stereotyped like those Muslim terrorists. The third part is entitled 'David Janiak', the name of the artist who goes by the name of Falling Man; one of the victims of the terrorist attack. Each of these three parts is ended with a section. All the three sections , entitled 'On Marienstrasse', 'In Nokomis' and 'In the Hudson Corridor' respectively, are devoted to Hammad. The characterization of Hammad reflects DeLillo's genius and artistic skillfulness. He is one of the rare Western writers who tried to present a humanistic explanation of the feelings and thoughts of the terrorists. Hammad is portrayed in Falling Man not only as a murderer but also as a victim of his religious background and community. He is impelled to be part of this terrorist attack, as DeLillo alludes, by the teachings and rules of his religion 'Islam' and the impact of the collective thought of the Muslim community. Thus, Hammad is a terrorist because he is a normal human who is being corrupted by Islamic religiosity. At the first stage of joining the radical group of Islamic extremists, Hammad was hesitant and showed resistance to their indoctrination, but later on he gradually started to follow their instructions under the convince that they are inferred from the orders of Allah found in the Holy Quran. He, as DeLillo wants to say, was a normal human being when he had a girlfriend, with whom he had a sexual relationship. His conflict started when he followed the instructions of growing his beard: "He spent time at the mirror looking at his beard, knowing he was not supposed to trim it" (DeLillo 82). The beard, in this sense, is the symbol of Muslims/Terrorists as stereotyped in the West which is also enhanced in this novel: "They [The terrorists] were all growing beards. One of them even told his fatherto grow a beard" (79).What could not be psychologically explained by DeLillo is Hammad's willingness to death. Logically, anyone cannot die for someone or something unless he has a strong belief of his thoughts and motives. This is almost noticed by Nath who tries to make a reasonable justification to fill up the gap that he feels is left in the novel: "It would be simplistic to read Hammad as purely an articulation of a terrorist, and I suggest he functions as an expression of a nihilistic faith in death and destruction" (74). He confirms that this "sentiment is inscribed within a wider discourse that is envisaged as Islam' (74). Hence, Hammad's willingness to death, Nath implicates, can be understood not on the individual level, but on the collective level. Hammad's hesitations and doubts were refuted by his peer, Ameer: "Islam is the world outside the prayer room as well as the sūrah 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" (DeLillo79-80).

Nath's justifications is not convincing particularly when it comes to the climax of the Hammad's internal conflict shortly before the attacks take place. He is still hesitant, trying to convince himself : "This is your long wish, to die with your brothers" (DeLillo 238). Not convinced yet, he compared himself with Shia boys in Iraq-Iran war:Then he thought of something he'd long forgotten. Hethought of the Shia boys on the battlefield in the Shatt alArab. He saw them coming out of trenches and redoubts andrunning across the mudflats toward enemy positions, mouthsopen in mortal cry. He took strength from this, seeing them cutdown in waves by machine guns, boys in the hundreds, then thethousands, suicide brigades, wearmg red bandannas aroundtheir necks and plastic keys underneath, to open the door toparadise. (238)Attempting to overcome his

doubts, he calmed himself by thinking about paradise, assuring himself: "Every sin of your life is forgiven in the seconds to come.There is nothing between you and eternal life in the seconds to come" (239).The atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty which is created around the character of Hammad has been cleverly used by DeLillo not to argue the common Western view of Islam as a source of terrorism, but, on the contrary, to enhance it showing that Islamic teachings corrupted the purity of human beings.

The concept of Islamohpobia in Falling Man is remarkably manifested in Lianne's description of the Muslims and her response to the music played by her neighbor Elena. She expressed her hatred of the music which she thinks it is one way or another related to the Islamic tradition. She was unable to convince her husband to go to Elena and stop the music. Her repetition of calling the music a 'noise' shows her perplexed mind and psychological problem – the hysteria of Islamophobia: Do this. Knock on the door. Adopt a posture. Mention thenoise as noise. Knock on the door, mention the noise, use theopen pretense of civility and calm, the parody of fellow-tenantcourtesy that every tenant sees as such, and gently mention thenoise. But mention the noise only as noise. Knock on the door,mention the noise, adopt a posture of suave calm, openly phony,and do not allude to the underlying theme of a certain kind ofmusic as a certain form of political and religious statement now of all times. (69)

Her annoyance of listening to a kind of music, which may have a slight connection with Islam, result from her fear of those "who think alike, talk alike, eat the samefood at the same time… Say the sameprayers, word for word, in the same prayer stance, day and night,following the arc of sun and moon" (68).

7. Conclusion
Although tens of novels, plays, and movies have dealt with 9/11 terrorist attack and directly enhanced the fear of Islam as the major source of terrorism, Falling Man, which is not an exception of course, is distinguished with the writer's attempt to read the minds and psychology of the attackers. DeLillogave a space in his novel to the perspectives of both the murderers and the victims which enabled him to hold the humanitarian justification of the Western fear of Islam (Islamophobia).

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