

CULTURAL TRAUMA AND THE 9/11 NARRATIVES BY EUROPEAN-AMERICAN AND MIDDLE- EASTERN AMERICAN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT: *In this paper, we argue that Jeffrey C. Alexander's theory of Cultural Trauma provides a more fruitful framework for the study of 9/11 narratives written by both European-American writers and hyphenated Americans with Middle Eastern backgrounds. Unlike previous studies which have focused on Homi Bhabha's notion of "interstitial perspectives," we will focus on how Alexander's theory helps us understand how European-American writers perceived and interpreted the crisis of 9/11, and how hyphenated American writers reacted to the dominant discourse on this tragic incident. Therefore, the present study is an endeavor to delineate the tenets of Alexander's theory and to show how this theory helps us see the fundamental arguments and counterarguments on 9/11 offered by two different bodies of writers. Consequently, the first part of the paper will focus on the subtleties of Alexander's theory and its ability to provide us with a framework within which we can analyze these different narratives, and the second part of this paper will put his theory of cultural trauma into practice. Using Alexander's theory, we will offer a reading of such diverse works as DeLillo's *Falling Man* and McInerney's *The Good Life* as well as Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Alaa Al Aswany's *Chicago*. This analysis will help us see how the white American narrative of invasion, xenophobia, fall, and rise again meets the alternative narrative of being surrounded and destructive nostalgia of writers whose home countries have been impacted by America's war on terror after 9/11.*

KEYWORDS: Cultural Trauma, 9/11 Literature, Diaspora Literature, Crisis

INTRODUCTION

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence. Do you ask your writers how they feel about this? Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (DeLillo *Mao Li: A Novel* 41)

We have started this paper with a quotation from one of Don DeLillo's pre-9/11 novels to show how so many of the concerns with which post-9/11 writers were preoccupied could also be found in works written prior to this tragic event that changed the world order forever. The present study is an effort to investigate the relationship between two domains of human life which have, over the years, become extremely interwoven, namely, crisis, and literature. Different forms of literature deal with different forms of crises, almost to the point where it is inconceivable to think of a work of literature without a form of conflict at the center of it. Whether real conflicts or otherwise, readers have always been fascinated by the way fictional characters respond to, and deal with various forms of crises because, if for nothing else, these

works provide the readers with certain outlets through which they can vent their feelings about the same conflicts, or at least learn about how other fictional human beings would react under certain circumstances.

Even though our world has always been replete with different forms of crises, including world wars, hunger, famine, etc., the postmodern world has witnessed the rise of what is now unanimously called terrorism and terrorist attacks. It should be noted that feelings of terror and uncertainty have always troubled human beings. In fact, one could argue that many of the greatest works of literature owe their existence to some form of conflict and crisis that encouraged a writer to write about them. No matter how different the nature of these conflicts is, the keyword for the majority of the events in history which have fascinated writers is, as it is with 9/11, the “fall” usually from a state of prelapsarian innocence to a certain form of growth and experience. This transition is not limited to any specific historical or literary period. In fact, the commonality of describing such a transition in times of crisis is what makes this topic ever so fascinating for scholars. In order to investigate the influence that such an important event in history had on people, in general, and writers, in particular, we should turn to a theory which can explain the nature of such events, i.e. Trauma Theory. The proceeding paragraphs will provide an overview of this theory throughout the twentieth century before delving into the main theory with which this paper is concerned, that of Cultural Trauma.

The concept of trauma has been analyzed from different perspectives; consequently, each one of the theories which are going to be discussed below will be identified with the name of the approach which has been used to study trauma, e.g. Psychological, Naturalistic, Enlightening, Cultural, etc. Nevertheless, Jeffrey Alexander, whose theory will provide the main framework for the study of 9/11 in the literature of both white American writers and the hyphenated American ones, believes that the umbrella term of “Lay Trauma Theory” will sufficiently describe different iterations of Trauma theory except the cultural one. His selection of the term “lay” to describe the theories that came before the theory of cultural trauma is justified, he argues, by the fact that there’s a lack of extensive research behind the workings of trauma when the society is completely removed as an irrelevant phenomenon. In the following paragraphs, we will try to explain what each of these categories entail, and also why Alexander believed in their insufficiency to explain the concept of trauma fully. However, and because Alexander fails to provide a diachronic study of Trauma throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially, its inception in the 1890s in the works of Jean-Martin Charcot as well as its thorough development in the works of Sigmund Freud in later decades, we will try to provide a brief description of the theories that came before him. As Paul Lerner has argued in his book, Charcot was the first scholar to discuss the concept of trauma in relation to mental illnesses like hysteria. Lerner argues that it was Charcot who came up with the “incubation” theory of the effects of trauma, which is defined as the interval years between the first touch of trauma and the physical and psychological effects of it that resurface years later (Lerner). However, it was decades later and in the revolutionary works of Sigmund Freud that this dormant period of inactivity was given its due consideration. Freud’s understanding of trauma is best summarized in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* as the following, “An event in the subject’s life, defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization” (Laplanche and Pontalis 465-69). This quality of trauma to remain dormant and later on to resurface is what led many other twentieth century scholars to base their theory of trauma on what Freud and Charcot had discussed. In the next section, we will analyze the subcategories of what Alexander calls Lay Trauma Theories and the “naturalistic fallacy” with which Alexander takes serious issues.

Enlightenment and Psychoanalytic Theories of Trauma

According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, these two variations of trauma theory fall under the category of Lay Trauma Theories, by which he means the kind of theories that consider traumas as “naturally occurring events that shatter an individual or collective actor’s sense of well-being,” (2). What Alexander is arguing here is the most fundamental fault that he has perceived in these two theories, i.e. the fact these theories posit that “the power to shatter- the “trauma”- is believed to emerge from events themselves” (ibid.). Alexander calls this fault the “naturalistic fallacy” in that both of these theories assume that an incident can be traumatic in itself and regardless of the social sphere in which the incident happens. These theories even go further and argue that the “reaction to such shattering events- “being traumatized”- is felt and thought to be an immediate and unreflexively response,” (3). In other words, these theories take traumatic incidents for granted because they believe that events can be inherently traumatic and that such incidents do not require a social sphere for their development because, Alexander posits, they interact “with human nature,” (ibid.).

Enlightenment Theory of Trauma

A subcategory of the trauma theories which are labeled as ‘lay,’ the enlightenment mode of thinking “suggests that trauma is a kind of rational response to abrupt change, whether at the individual or social level. The objects or events that trigger trauma are perceived clearly by actors, their responses are lucid, and the effects of these responses are problem solving and progressive” (Alexander 3). This type of trauma can take many different shapes and forms, but what binds all of them together is the fact that people are believed to respond to these situations in an orderly and logical manner. These reactions will necessarily take the form of corrective action through which individuals can act to eliminate the source of anxiety and trauma. This mode of thinking takes it for granted that people can act normally and logically under all kinds of circumstances. Therefore, it suggests that people will rationally think of some course of action when they are influenced by a traumatic event, and that this course of action will definitely be a logical and successful one.

This form of thinking has been developed, in probably greater detail than ever, in Arthur G. Neal’s influential book, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century*. Neal’s main concern in the book is to show how people who are traumatized by an event can form bonds which can bring them closer. However, in his discussion of the way collectivities are traumatized, Neal, too, assigns the quality of being traumatic to the event itself rather than the way a certain population perceives the event. As the title of his book suggests, Neal is dealing with trauma on a national level, but it is fascinating to point out that what he does is in fact dealing with events as being traumatic in nature even in a social sphere as big as a nation. According to Neal, any form of national trauma comes into existence by “individual and collective reactions to a volcano-like event that shook the foundations of the social world” (Neal ix). In other words, Neal believes that the amount of “radical change” which certain events can bring about “within a short period of time” is the direct result of those events being “extraordinary” in nature so much so that they have “an explosive quality” that can create “disruption” in the order of things (Neal 3-10). Having established the fact that events are traumatic in nature, Neal goes on to explain what is generally regarded as the enlightenment mode of thinking about trauma theory. As previously mentioned, the reason why scholars like Jeffrey Alexander call this theory “enlightenment” is because it assumes that even under duress, people will still be able to think rationally and come up with problem-solving solutions that will help them deal with the incident. Neal supports this argument fully in his book. He

argues that such inherent qualities which exist in traumatic events “command the attention of all major subgroups of the population” (9-10) so much so that there is no other possibility for the way people respond to an event except for being reasonable enough to come up with a solution that will lead to progress and development. This argument that people will still be reasonable and logical enough to deal with a traumatic event in a progressive way lies at the heart of this theory, and this is why Neil emphasizes this fact by saying, “The very fact that a disruptive event has occurred” signifies that “new opportunities emerge for innovation change” (18).

Despite the fact that Alexander considers this theory of trauma inadequate because of what he calls the naturalistic fallacy of such theories, he praises Neal for taking into account the importance of collectivities as opposed to theories which are basically focusing on the individual. In fact, Alexander argues that the very fact that Neil distinguishes between collective and individual trauma makes his theory more meaningful in comparison with theories which only focus on how individuals react to a traumatic event. Neil’s success in focusing on collective and national trauma as well as individual trauma is very much indebted to the fact that he has followed, and probably borrowed from, a model of trauma developed by Kai T. Erikson. In his sociological study of trauma, called *Everything in Its Path*, Erikson argues for a differentiation between the way trauma influences an individual and the way the same traumatic event can have a different form of influence on groups and nations,

By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively. ... By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.” But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared . . . “We” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson 153-54 Emphasis Mine)

Regardless of the fact that this theory has its strengths, it should still be noted that it falls short of taking into account how the whole society helps establish a certain event as being traumatic, and this is the main reason why scholars like Jeffrey Alexander and Neil Smelser argue for its insufficiency when it comes to trauma in today’s transnational world. Having explained the Enlightenment theory of trauma as well as its weaknesses and strengths, it’s time we turned to the other form of trauma theory which gained popular attention in the 1990s through the works of an influential scholar in Trauma and Memory studies, i.e. Cathy Caruth. The following section will focus on the Psychoanalytic theory of trauma, and it will endeavor to delineate how this theory approaches a problematic concept such as trauma.

The Psychoanalytic Theory of Trauma

The psychoanalytic theory of trauma, which was initially popularized by Freud and later on by his students and followers, focuses on the psychological pressure that a traumatic event exerts on individuals. According to this theory, the intense fear that an individual experiences in the wake of a traumatic and tragic event forces them to repress the whole experience in their unconscious mind. Moreover, and quite unlike the enlightenment theory, neither rational

thinking nor logical problem-solving strategies is adopted by the individual; rather, the weight of the traumatic event is so much that it forces the individual to distort the whole experience in his mind and imagination so much so that after some time, the individual will only remember a distorted memory of what actually happened. Jeffrey Alexander summarizes the approach as follows, “This approach places a model of unconscious emotional fears and cognitively distorting mechanisms of psychological defense between the external shattering event and the actor’s internal traumatic response” (Alexander 5). Furthermore, Alexander argues that according to this model of thinking, the “truth’ of the event is only perceived unconsciously, by which he means that truth will become secondary to the individual’s feelings. As a result, “traumatic feelings and perceptions” Alexander argues, come not only from the originating event but from the anxiety of keeping it repressed” (ibid.). Even though it was Lacan who drew attention to the significance of language in the formation of emotions in human beings, I will not be discussing him here because trauma was not a central part of his magnificent career as a scholar. I will, however, discuss another influential scholar whose theories of trauma have become central to any discussion regarding this matter.

As Jeffrey Alexander even claims in the first chapter of *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Cathy Caruth is probably the most distinguished scholar in theorizing and giving shape to the psychoanalytic model of trauma. Caruth explains her theory of trauma in two influential books which became instant classics in the 90s, namely, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), and the book she edited, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). For Caruth, who is immensely influenced by the Freudian conception of trauma, traumatic incidents are concrete examples of the inability of human beings to express their feelings when they are touched by events whose magnitude is extremely overwhelming. Caruth agrees with Freud in that both of them believe that the consequences of a traumatic incident will haunt the individuals for the rest of their lives because human beings cannot escape the immensity and intensity of traumatic events, especially when they lead to different forms of loss. Caruth says, “Freud’s intuition of, and his passionate fascination with, traumatic experiences” is related to his proposition regarding “the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (Caruth 2), and this is a rendering of Freud which she uses in her discussion of Trauma and how the emotions which are associated with a certain tragic event in our unconscious mind will modify the kind of reactions we will show later in life. Also, it should be noted that the conscious mind can never participate in these reactions because, Caruth posits, the event happens “too unexpectedly” and therefore it cannot be “fully known” which is why neither the event nor the reactions to that event will be “available to consciousness” (Caruth 3-4). As a result, the event is only experienced in whatever distorted form the unconscious mind gives it, and the reactions of the individual who has been subject to such an overwhelming event will be in the form of “nightmares and the repetitive actions” (ibid.) which the survivor’s mind associates with the event. Therefore, one could argue that this is the part where Caruth and her psychoanalytic model of the theory parts ways with the enlightenment model, i.e. for Caruth and her followers, trauma is defined not only as the event itself, but also as the reactions that come into existence as a result of it. She asserts, “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on,” and this is why for her, the symptoms that patients of trauma show in later stages of their lives “tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available,” (ibid.); in other words, the symptoms of patients tell us equally important information about the nature of trauma, and they should be studied as meticulously as the original event was. To sum it up, we can say that for Caruth, trauma is defined as the traumatic event as well as the way it is

perceived in the survivor's unconscious mind; the third integral part of trauma is the recurring reactions of the victim which will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Even though this conception of trauma succeeds in analyzing trauma and its impact on a personal level, it does nothing to include the way such individual responses reverberate in society; in other words, this theory also fails in explaining how a traumatic event influences, and possibly changes, a collectivity as a whole. In the following section, first, I will try to address some of the criticism that has been written in response to both the enlightenment and the psychoanalytic models of trauma, then, I will finally try to discuss the theory of Cultural Trauma which has been proposed by scholars like Jeffrey C. Alexander. This theory, I believe, will help us understand the way the writers of the Iranian diaspora have reacted to the tragedy of 9/11.

Jeffrey Alexander's Critique of the Enlightenment and the Psychoanalytic Theories of Trauma

As it has become clear in the course of the previous pages, Jeffrey Alexander's main critique of the two approaches enumerated above lies in the fact that they both suffer from what Alexander calls a "naturalistic fallacy." As discussed briefly before, this fallacy forces the abovementioned approaches to claim that certain events can be traumatic nature regardless of the social sphere in which they unfold. Alexander refutes this premise and argues that his notion of cultural trauma in, inevitably, based on such rejection, "First and foremost, we maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution" (Alexander 8). Alexander even goes further and explains that such an attribution doesn't necessarily happen at the time of the incident; rather, he argues, the said attribution can occur before, during, and even after an event unfolds.

In an effort to link his theory of trauma to theories of nationalism, Alexander calls this social attribution of trauma to an event "an 'imagined' traumatic event," (ibid.), which is to say that the event cannot be said to have trauma in its nature. In order to further corroborate his argument, Alexander cites Benedict Anderson and his influential book, *Imagined Communities* (1991). As Alexander puts it, Anderson's main argument in this classic book on nationalism is to propose a model of a nation which is based on the collective beliefs of the populations that identify with one another. This argument of Alexander's is essential to the basic argument of the present paper as well. As mentioned before, what this study seeks to accomplish is the ability to argue that what certain books are doing after the tragedy of 9/11 depends on whether or not the writers are European-American or hyphenated Americans, and this is significant because the impact of 9/11 was widespread enough to go beyond American borders and influence the politics of many other countries, especially those in the Middle East. According to Alexander, Anderson's main concern in that book "is not with trauma per se, but with the kinds of self-consciously ideological narratives of nationalist history. Yet these collective beliefs often assert the existence of some national trauma. In the course of defining national identity, national histories are constructed around injuries that cry out for revenge" (ibid.). Therefore, once we can identify the main source of trauma in a social sphere like the society, we can then go on to build our understanding of a certain nation and how we should define them in relation to others.

Nevertheless, it should be argued, this is not the main source of influence on Alexander. In fact, he confesses that his theory of cultural trauma is indebted to a Durkheimian meaning of the word, "imagined," even more than the influence he has received from Anderson. In his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim argues that phenomena in this world

exist in two very different forms of reality, i.e. the reality of their existence in the 'real' world as well as their reality in our consciousness. Therefore, the way we personally perceive a phenomenon is very different from the way we perceive it with others, and this is why Durkheim uses two different terms to describe these two forms of reality, i.e. individual totem, and collective totem. Durkheim says,

Therefore the representations that express them seem to us very different from those that collective influences awaken in us. The two sorts of representation form two kinds of mental state, and they are as separate and distinct as the two forms of life to which they correspond. As a result, we feel as though we are in touch with two distinct sorts of reality with a clear line of demarcation between them: the world of profane things on one side, the world of sacred things on the other. (Durkheim and Swain 212)

Alexander claims that his theory of cultural trauma, which runs in partial opposition to both the enlightenment theory of trauma as well as the psychoanalytic one, is based on the same premise. In fact, he posits that just like what Durkheim says, in his theory, too, "Imagination is intrinsic to the very process of representation. It seizes upon an inchoate experience from life, and forms it, through association, condensation, and aesthetic creation, into some specific shape" and that "it is only through the imaginative process of representation that actors have the sense of experience," (Alexander 9). Consequently, one can finally see the main problem that Alexander has with the two theories of trauma that he says are suffering from the naturalistic fallacy. In other words, Alexander's approach is not very much concerned with the reality and nature of the event, but rather, he is most surely concerned with how the event unfolds in a social sphere and how certain members of the collectivity perceive the event as a collectivity and respond to it in a collective form. To put it in Alexander's own words,

...while every argument about trauma claims *ontological reality*, as cultural sociologists we are not primarily concerned with the accuracy of social actors' claims, much less with evaluating their moral justification. *We are concerned only with how and under what conditions the claims are made, and with what results.* It is neither ontology nor morality, but *epistemology*, with which we are concerned. (9, Emphasis Added)

Even though it has gradually become clear what Alexander means by cultural trauma, we haven't talked about the process through which an event is established as trauma yet. In his conception of trauma, an event has to go through certain events before we can call it traumatic; for instance, these events should be abrupt and sudden, and they should influence the collective identity of the society in which the event has occurred. Trauma, for Alexander, only occurs when the members of a collectivity decide that they have been influenced by an event so much that they will no longer be the same, and this is where Alexander also tries to bridge the gap between his theory of trauma and his conception of identity as a social construct. He says, "Identity involves a cultural reference. Only if the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event. It is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves" (Alexander 10).

Jeffrey C. Alexander and the Claim-making Processes that Constitute Cultural Trauma

Having talked about some of the criticism that has been directed at other theories of trauma, it's time we delineated the theory which will prove central to my overarching theme of to this paper, i.e. cultural trauma. The first general definition of cultural trauma is presented by Jeffrey

Alexander as the following, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1). This broad definition, however, needs a lot of clarification in terms of how it occurs in a society as a whole. One distinction should be made right away because it is at the core of how Alexander’s theory is different from other theories of trauma. For Alexander, not all events lead to trauma, and this distinction was discussed in the previous section from the point of view of what Alexander called ‘naturalistic fallacy.’ Moreover, Alexander believes that events that *are labeled* as trauma can still not be cultural trauma because, for him, a cultural trauma should arise from some form of a cultural crisis; in other words, an event should be important enough to penetrate the social sphere of society and influence the largest group of people. This is probably why Alexander believes that cultural trauma is not about a group of people feeling pain because of an incident, but rather this form of trauma includes an “acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (10). An important observation to be made here is that this section of Alexander’s theory makes it clear why his notion of trauma is associated with other concepts which are relevant to our discussion, i.e. collective memory and collective identity. Therefore, one could argue that it is only when an event has made permanent marks on the memory of a collectivity so much so that they feel that their identities have somehow changed that we can label an event as being culturally traumatic. Moreover, it is only after such realization on the part of the collectivity that “Collective actors ‘decide’ to represent *social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go*” (ibid., Emphasis Added). The question still remains: How do these collective actors represent the pain? Alexander would say through ‘claim-making processes that constitute cultural trauma.’

The claim-making processes that Alexander proposes can be summarized as a series of questions that are asked about an event, the answers to which will constitute the meaning that should be associated with the event, and how the collectivity can now define itself in relation to this newly-defined meaning and event. Alexander believes that when an event happens that disrupts the sense of who certain people are, these people will claim that such an event has been traumatic; therefore, they will try to *represent* the event to other people who have not experienced the event firsthand. Alexander, however, warns us that “events are one thing, representation of events quite another” (Alexander 10), and this is why his theory is aptly suited to this study because this research is also trying to analyze the representations of an incident which it claims to have been traumatic. Alexander calls this process of bridging the “gap between event and representation,” which happens when members of collectivity decide to react to the event, “trauma process;” this process includes representations of the events which have been influential in determining who the members of a collectivity are. Therefore, to clarify what he means by the term ‘claim’ Aleksander says,

The persons who compose collectivities broadcast symbolic representations-characterizations-of ongoing social events, past, present, and future. They broadcast these representations as members of a social group. These group representations can be seen as ‘claims’ about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply. *It is a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution.* (Alexander 12, Emphasis Mine)

This claim-making process depends on various parts of the society; however, what is central to it is a process the name of which Alexander has borrowed from Kenneth Thompson, i.e. “spiral of signification,” (qtd. in Alexander 12), by which Alexander means, “Representation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story” (ibid.). In a sense, what Alexander is saying is that this whole process is a story-telling procedure in which certain collective actors decide to tell their version of the events. As with other stories, the stories of trauma are based on four core elements,

1. *The nature of the pain.* What actually happened-to the particular group and to the wider collectivity of which it is a part?
2. *The nature of the victim.* What group of persons was affected by this traumatizing pain? Were they particular individuals or groups, or “the people” in general? Did a singular and delimited group receive the brunt of the pain, or were several groups involved?
3. *Relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience.* To what extent do the members of the audience for trauma representations experience an identity with the immediately victimized group?
4. *Attribution of responsibility.* In creating a compelling trauma narrative, it is critical to establish the identity of the perpetrator, the “antagonist.” Who actually injured the victim? Who caused the trauma? This issue is always a matter of symbolic and social construction. (Alexander 13-15)

To summarize, one could argue that what Alexander is proposing here is an analysis of who tells whom the story of an event which has proven problematic for certain populations. Consequently, what Alexander is concerned with in his theory is not the authenticity of the events and the claims nor a moral investigation of the storyteller, but with “how and under what conditions the claims are made and with what results” (9), and this is the main reason why his theory is so much intertwined with Aesthetics. His theory of cultural trauma focuses on representations of an event which has changed a group’s identity; in other words, he is trying to see how this newly formed identity, which is the result of a significant event, leads to the production of works about the event. Alexander asserts, “Insofar as meaning work takes place in the aesthetic realm, it will be channeled by specific genres and narratives that aim to produce imaginative identification and emotional catharsis” (15).

Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma can be best described as a communal practice, on the part of various social agencies and institutions, as well as collective ‘actors,’ in which they all try to make sense of an event which they interpret as a threat to the basic tenets of who they are and their place of origin. As previously mentioned, Alexander’s theory does not ask for any direct moral judgment of these claims because it acknowledges them as ‘representations’ based on the personal experiences of those who decide to represent an event. Just like there is no truth to certain genres in literature in the sense that the whole characters and events can be mere imaginations of the author’s mind, these claim-making processes also do not try to authenticate the claim because what they are most concerned with is the big picture of the human condition in general. Therefore, through this social practice, the participants try to make sense of event, and in so doing, they will try to reinvent themselves around this newly-fabricated meaning. As a result, the emerging collective identity of the group will be injected

with the meaning that they have just assigned to a life-shattering event. Moreover, this interpretation of the event and the meaning which has been assigned to it will lead collective actors to reimagine the history of their population in the light of this new meaning which they have found. The next section of this paper will be an analysis of how this theory informs literary studies, and how literature's role in the wake of traumatic incidents becomes more important when it is viewed from Alexander's point of view.

The Theory of Cultural Trauma and Literature

Since the main purpose of the present study is to analyze the way writers of different ethnicities have perceived and represented 9/11, it is inevitably necessary to discuss how the theory of trauma, which is a pivotal part of such other theories as long-distance nationalism, is realized and presented in the realm of literature. Astrid Erll, whose classic books in the realm of memory studies is studied worldwide, argues in her influential book, *Memory in Culture*, that literary representations of memory and trauma are indeed one of the best ways of investigating how a certain event has influenced the consciousness and identity of a collectivity. This argument is also mirrored in Jeffrey Alexander's notion of cultural trauma, and how one's memory of that trauma reappears in both the psychoanalytic theory of trauma as well as the cultural theory of it. Alexander asserts that whereas "Much as these memory residues surface through free association in psychoanalytic treatment, *they appear in public life through the creation of literature*" (Alexander 6). Astrid Erll also argues that literature can play two very important roles in trauma and memory studies,

A specific feature of literature, and indeed of art in general, is its ability to offer (as systems theory would formulate it) first- and second-order observations of the world simultaneously (see Luhmann 2000a). On the one hand, literary works construct versions of the past: affirmative and subversive, traditional and new ones. On the other hand, they make exactly this process of construction observable, and thus also criticizable. Literary works are memory-productive and memory-reflexive... (Erll 151)

What Erll and other scholars in the realm of memory studies, like Maurice Halbwachs, are proposing is that literature is the very medium which is used to represent the way trauma and memory work in the social sphere. However, what is quite unique about Erll's conception of the role of literature is that she believes that literature can play two very important roles at the same time. For her, literature can be both a huge collection of people's memories and experiences which can be studied in an effort to see how individuals have reacted to an event as a collectivity, and a meta medium which is used to participate in the social practice of remembering and/or forgetting. In other words, whereas the first use of literature in relation to trauma considers it as a container of memories, the second use of literature is making the process of writing down these memories visible by arguing how people came to write about their experiences; this latter use of literature can then be studied and analyzed to see how it contributed to trauma itself, and whether or not the traumatic effects have multiplied or they have been reduced. As a result, we can argue that literature plays a great role in showing how trauma affects people, and how the very production of works of literature influences the very trauma they depict. The following section of the paper, therefore, will be an analysis of a number of 9/11 works written by European-American writers and the ones which are written by Middle-Eastern American writers. Hopefully, Alexander's theory will help us understand how each group perceived 9/11, and how their representation of this traumatic incident played a greater role in world politics.

The first two works we're going to discuss are written by European-American writers and represent the white American discourse of 9/11 and what it meant to them. Don DeLillo's fascination with conflict and crisis, in general, and 9/11, in particular, is not restricted to his famous essay, "In the Ruins of the Future." In 2007, DeLillo published a novel about the events of September 11. *Falling Man* is the story of Keith Neudecker, a survivor of the attacks. The name of the novel is probably an homage to a famous photo by Richard Drew which captures a man falling down from the towers of the World Trade Center. As previously noted, the concept of 'falling' became a fascination for most post-9/11 artists, and this is one of the reasons why it is also an integral part of DeLillo's novel. In the novel, Keith's estranged wife, Lianne becomes obsessed with the performance of a person throughout New York who dangles himself from very tall buildings in order to emulate the horrors that people who were forced to jump from the towers felt. However, what makes *Falling Man* relevant to our discussion here is the fact that DeLillo's main preoccupation in this particular novel is less the fantasy and the representation of the terrorist attacks than the traumatic experiences of the survivors, especially those who were in the buildings and were lucky enough to escape or even those who lost someone really important. The novel, argues Pozorski, is mainly concerned "with the healing or recuperative power of language and performance art" (20). Therefore, when Lianne first witnesses the performance of the falling man, she is reminded of "those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump" (*Falling Man: A Novel* 33). For Lianne and her husband Keith, who are both suffering from the constant fear of facing the inevitable, trauma repeats itself in numerous different forms. Lianne's work experience with Alzheimer's patients as well as her father's suicide after being diagnosed with the same disease lead her to an obsessive fear of falling victim to the same disease, and this is why she constantly tries to count from 100 backwards so that she can discern her disease even if medical examinations can't. Keith's experience in the WTC towers also awakens in him a feeling of powerlessness in the face of the inevitable, and this is probably why he resorts to playing poker in which he can feel some sort of control over what chance and fate have in store for him. Nevertheless, it could be argued that DeLillo's treatment of trauma in the novel is not intended to be pessimistic and fatalistic. What DeLillo shows in the novel is the recuperative power of memory. The repetitive nature of memory constitutes an integral part of personhood, and this is best conveyed in the novel when Lianne is working with the patients who are suffering from Alzheimer's. Lianne's method of helping these patients includes the practice of writing a diary of the events that have happened to the patients. When discussing it with her supervisor, Lianne learns that he doesn't support her proposition to increase the number of the sessions when patients are asked to write something of their past. Lianne's supervisor warns her about the dangers of such a practice by saying, "From this point on, you understand, it's all about loss. We're dealing inevitably here with diminishing returns" (*Falling Man: A Novel* 60). Her supervisor argues that any move forward on the part of the patients is essentially a loss of some part of their past, and that no matter how hard Lianne is trying, she will never be able to preserve the parts that the patients are losing or prevent the inevitable dementia that is happening to the patients. This part of the novel is significant because while these patients are trying to remember parts of their past in order to preserve them for later reference, the fact that these memories will not come back to them later as a recurrent memory devalues the very act of recording them essentially. However, this is not the case for Lianne and Keith. They both remember the traumas they have experienced in their lives quite vividly, and this is why it was argued earlier why this receptive nature of memory is vital. Regardless of how painful the repetition of such traumatic memories is, the very fact that these people get to revisit those memories can actually help them become a better person in terms of being able to deal with traumatic incidents and using it in a way which can benefit themselves and other people around

them. Therefore, Lianne's obsession with the falling man artist, which reminds her of the tragedy of 9/11 as well as her father's suicide, alongside Keith's PTSD can be put to good use if they both realize the importance of memory. It should also be noted that this kind of revisiting a trauma in the past is different from seeing it on TV because in this case, the person is dealing with something that s/he has experienced intimately rather than something which has been presented to them by the media. As a result, we can argue that what DeLillo accomplishes in his book and essay is to show how coming to terms with the reality of crisis and trying to use it as a way of seeking personal growth and development can actually redeem people in the years following a life-changing event and help them get along with their surroundings and fellow human beings.

Alexander's theory helps us see how some paradigm-shifting events can stimulate certain social actors to come forward and present their versions of the event to other people who belong to the same social group. DeLillo's *Falling Man*, represents how the people who populate the novel feel that their lives and consciences have been invaded by some incident; therefore, it can be argued that the traumatic nature of the event is established instantly. Moreover, the same event encourages certain characters to reevaluate their lives and their roles in society. However, the analysis doesn't stop there. Alexander also helps us understand why a novelist like DeLillo decides to write about 9/11, and this reason can be best described as one that fosters a certain narrative about this incident; a narrative which is also shared by other European-American writers about how this event changed their lives forever. As discussed by Richard Gray, in his book, *After the Fall*, what distinguishes this body of literature from the fiction produced by other writers is the fact that the main concerns of the former can be best summarized in four main keywords, "invasion, xenophobia, fall, and rise again," which is to say that these writers are trying to show how the invasion of the American soil, which led to a distrust of foreign nationals in the US, brought America almost to its knees, but only to rise again with the hope of reestablishing itself as a world power. This sentiment is also echoed in numerous other works written by like-minded writers.

DeLillo, therefore, is not the only writer to tackle the question of 9/11. In fact, as mentioned earlier, many other western writers also started writing fiction and nonfiction in response to the tragedy of September 11. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Joyce Carol Oates, David Foster Wallace, Deborah Eisenberg, Jay McInerney, Ian McEwan, Jonathan Safran Foer, John Updike, Cormac McCarthy, and Martin Amis are among well-known Western writers to have written on 9/11.

This very short list of writers who have addressed this issue suggests the enigmatic nature of representation an incident like 9/11 and how it influences the consciousness of people. Even though each and every one of these writers depicts the events in their own idiosyncratic ways, there are themes that can be traced in almost all of their works. Trauma, for instance, is one of the central themes of 9/11 literature. So is time and what happens to our understanding of time in times of crisis. The constant repetition of the images captured on 9/11 has led writers like Charlie Lee-Potter to describe the notion of time after 9/11 as "the 'continuous now'" (21), implying how the constant repetition of these traumatic images makes it difficult for people to move on with their lives, of course, only when they stick to the images they see in media. However, some of the writers listed above have tried to tackle this question of circular time in another light; in other words, there are writers, like McInerney in *The Good Life*, who present us with a linear movement of plot in their novels in order to show how people's lives unfolded in the days quickly following the terrorist attacks on the WTC towers. This is probably why

some critics have taken an issue with this kind of representation because they believe that *The Good Life*, for instance, undermines the importance of such an event by showing how the lives of the characters remain almost untouched by crises like 9/11. Birgit Däwes, for example, criticizes McInerney for his treatment of the attacks by saying, "...the conspicuous absence of the attacks at this point disrupts the reading process and acknowledges the difficulty of representing 9/11. At the same time, through the linear arrangement of its plot, *The Good Life*, emphasizes continuity and provides a counter-narrative to the discourse of radical change" (Däwes). According to her, McInerney is not really interested in showing what the events of 9/11 do to the ordinary people who populate her novel. This, however, is not true. *The Good Life* is the story of how two seemingly unrelated families come together and the fact that their lives cross paths in the days following the attacks helps them get on with their lives. In fact, what McInerney accomplishes in this post-9/11 novel is a realistic representation of the events and how people continue about their lives even after they have experienced something as life-changing as a terrorist attack. Both the Calloways and the banker on sabbatical, Luke McGovak, are experiencing some form of change when 9/11 happens, and this event brings the two families together in a moving story about hope, love, as well as hopelessness and loss. Despite the current criticism, *The Good Life* does acknowledge the importance of 9/11 and how it has immediately turned into a cultural, iconic phenomenon that will exert an everlasting influence on the lives of those involved. At some point in the novel, Corrine Calloway takes a walk on the streets only one day after the attacks, and she describes what she sees in the following way,

Yesterday morning, and well into the afternoon, thousands had made this march up West Broadway, fleeing the titling plume of smoke, covered in the same gray ash, slugging through it as the cerulean sky rained paper down on them- a Black Mass version of the old ticker-tape parades of lower Broadway. It was as if this solitary figure was re-enacting the retreat of a famous battle. (McInerney 69)

Corrine's description of the streets only one day after the event already shows how ritualistic this is going to become in near future. Through this kind of description, McInerney also manages to both convey how great a symbol this event will turn into, thus establishing it as a traumatic incident around which people will redefine themselves, as well as how significant people's efforts to conduct a normal life right after a traumatic incident has occurred is.

Even though this paper restricts itself to analyzing only two works from such writers, the same themes and concerns could also be found in such other works as Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which explores the interconnectedness of crisis and literature in that the novel runs two parallel stories side by side. One is about Oskar, a nine-year-old who has lost his father in the attacks of 9/11 and is now searching for the owner of a key his father has left him. The other story centers on the lives of Oskar's grandparents during and after the Second World War. Foer manages to suggest the timelessness of both trauma and tragedy in a novel and likens the effects of WWII to those of the 9/11 attacks; once again, Alexander's theory is useful in determining how trauma is established socially and as a cultural construct, and how traumatic incidents lead people to forming new identities around a life-changing event.

Contrary to the narrative provided by the aforementioned group of writers, there are Middle Eastern American writers who interpret the same incident differently. As previously noted, most of the scholarly research on diaspora literature after 9/11 uses such theories as Homi Bhabha's "interstitial perspectives" to account for the way these writers try to find their sites of convergence with European-American ones. What this theory lacks, nevertheless, is the fact

that the social and cultural element, though present is Bhabha, too, is less significant than in Alexander's theory. Furthermore, Bhabha's theory doesn't focus on the active role of social actors that Alexander mentions; in other words, whereas the former focuses on finding the common grounds with the narrative offered by the second group of writers, the latter argues that these writers (social actors) feel that the event has threatened the sense of who they are, and they are inevitably drawn to writing about the event with the hope that they can redefine themselves and their societies based on what this event has in store for them. To analyze this, we will turn to two novels written by one Pakistani-American writer, Mohsin Hamid, and one Egyptian writer, Al Aswany.

One of the most famous post-9/11 works of fiction written by a hyphenated American is Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Almost biographical in nature, this novel tells the story of a young Pakistani boy who goes to Princeton to get a PhD and is later employed by a big firm based in New York. The events of the novel happen in retrospect when the narrator of the novel comes upon a mysterious American tourist in Lahore and decides to tell him the story of his life. Changez, the main character and the narrator of the story, is living the American Dream in the US. He is doing great in the firm; he also meets and falls in love with an American girl named Erica. Everything is going great for Changez up to the point when he is in the Philippines on a work mission and the 9/11 attacks happen. From that moment onwards, everything seems to take a turn for the worst for Changez, both in his career as well as his personal life. One of the main reasons why critics unanimously agree that Hamid's book is among those few books which have gotten 9/11 right is because Hamid succeeds in showing the interrelationships between his Pakistani protagonist and all of his American friends and acquaintances. At an early point in the novel, Changez meets Erica's parents over dinner. Erica's father starts a conversation with Changez about Pakistan and asks him whether he is aware of the extreme fundamentalism that has crippled his country. After the initial astonishment at such one-sided remarks, Changez describes the father's knowledge of Pakistan as "a summary with some knowledge much like the short news items on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*...with, if you will forgive me, its typically American undercurrent of condescension," (Hamid 41). This is one of the early incidents that happen in the novel which foreshadow the turn of events for Changez. He acknowledges that there is some truth to what Erica's father has said about Pakistan, but he also points out how the American way of looking at things doesn't allow them to see the full picture. This resentment towards the way Americans assume they know everything about Middle East is later challenged when Changez hears about the 9/11 attacks while in the Philippines, "I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (50). Hamid's almost brutal description of the way the main character feels about the attacks is another indication of how hard he has tried to be neutral with regards to such a tragedy because a successful work of fiction is one which can analyze the way trauma influences different groups of people and how these differences can converge and lead to a better understanding of both groups. That reaction, however, is later modified by the protagonist when he says that his smile was not for the death of thousands of innocent people, but rather because he "was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees" (51). This is where events take a turn for the worse for the main character. After being stranded in Manila for several days, he and his colleagues finally find a flight back to New York. Changez describes the whole airport procedure in the following way,

...I was escorted by armed guards into a room where I was made to strip down to my boxer shorts—I had, rather embarrassingly, chosen to wear a pink pair patterned with teddy bears, but their revelation had no impact on the severe expressions of my inspectors—and I was, as a consequence, the last person to board our aircraft. My entrance elicited looks of concern from many of my fellow passengers. I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face... (52)

This feeling of being under constant suspicion is further corroborated when they are in New York and more and more people find out that Changez is actually from Pakistan. Surprised by how everyone is now reacting to his ethnicity, Changez describes what the behavior of everyone around him felt like by saying they all seemed to say, in one way or another, “*We are America...the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath*” (55 Italics in Original). Disillusioned by the way America is treating him, and realizing the intervention of the US in Pakistan’s internal affairs, e.g. “Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people’s houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse” (63), Changez becomes impatient with his situation in the US and starts thinking of forgetting about whatever he has achieved in the US and going home. However, this is not the only time in the novel that Changez raises the question of America’s interference in other countries’ affairs. Later in the novel he raises the same concern over the US Military invasion of Middle Eastern countries by saying, “I wondered how it was that America was able to wreak such havoc in the world—orchestrating an entire war in Afghanistan” (85). Even later in the novel, when he is still talking with the American tourist in Lahore, he raises the same issue with him by saying, “I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country’s constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts...America played a central role” (99). The American military’s invasion of Pakistan’s neighbor, Afghanistan shakes him even more, and he starts talking about Middle Eastern countries, in general, and Pakistan, in particular, and how they are not what Western media show them to be.

For we were not always burdened by debt, dependent on foreign aid and handouts; in the stories we tell of ourselves we were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels but rather saints and poets and—yes—conquering kings. We built the Royal Mosque and the Shalimar Gardens in this city, and we built the Lahore Fort with its mighty walls and wide ramp for our battle-elephants. And we did these things when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent. (67)

This is not the only reason for his decision to go back to Pakistan. As previously mentioned, Changez falls in love with an American girl named Erica. However, the relationship becomes troublesome when Erica, devastated by the early death of her childhood friend and lover, turns into a mentally unstable person who does not reciprocate Changez’s affection both out of her residual feelings for her ex-lover and her fear that she might hurt him if she does. Erica’s name itself is significant here because one can take her name to be a symbol for America itself: Am/ERICA. Erica’s conditions become worse, and she checks herself into an institution, and no matter how hard Changez tries to convince her to let go of her past, she seems unable to do so. At some point, Changez describes Erica’s condition as “disappearing into a powerful *nostalgia*, one from which only she could choose whether or not to return,” (75). The nostalgia for a

blissful period in her life when she felt powerful, young, and in love is similarly paralleled in the condition of America itself. Changez is clever enough to point out the similarities between Erica's conditions and what the US was experiencing after 9/11 by saying,

...it seemed to me that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time. There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as duty and honor. I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look *back*. (75-76)

America's determination to look back signifies, for Changez at least, a retreat back into a state of affairs where America was not welcoming of immigrants and people of color. This situation becomes even more sour when he is finally greeted with the most straightforward of all insults, "Fucking Arab," (Hamid 77) all the while he continues to hear about "tales of the discrimination Muslims were beginning to experience in the business world—stories of rescinded job offers and groundless dismissals" (79), and this is one of the reasons that he finally decides to go back to his country and forget about America. Another important aspect of Hamid's book is the way he describes the return of an immigrant to his home country. In Changez's case, as is the case with almost all immigrants, his transition into the Pakistani culture is not easy. He feels odd at first due to the differences which have now become apparent to him, and he even confesses that he feels "divided" and says, "I was filled with contempt for myself, such contempt that I could not bring myself to converse or to eat" (84). Hamid tackles the question of transnationality and the global citizen in later chapters of his novel by emphasizing the fact that one will never be able to feel at home at a certain location at one point in time. Changez, therefore, becomes the symbol of such a figure when he confesses that his confusion as to where he belongs was beginning to bother him, "I did not know where I stood on so many issues of consequence; I lacked a stable core. I was not certain where I belonged—in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither" (95). At a later point in the novel, he confesses to the American in Lahore that his "inhabitation" of the US "had not entirely ceased" and that he "remained emotionally entwined with Erica" which, as discussed earlier, could be symbolically interpreted as America because he goes on to say, "perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to relocate in the city of my birth" (109).

Finally, probably the most important concern that Hamid raises in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the way he, as a Pakistani writer, believes America reacted to the tragedy of 9/11. As discussed earlier, Alexander's theory teaches us how different bodies of people react to the same event differently because that event might mean something completely different to them. This difference in viewpoint, however, is not haphazard; rather, they see the same event differently because the impact of that incident on them is different. In the novel, we are constantly presented with the American way of things, and the Middle Eastern way of things, and even though people who belong to each group consider themselves justified in having a certain viewpoint, a realization occurs to Changez that maybe for once, these two countries can agree that they see things differently and that neither narrative is superior to the other. Talking to the same stranger in Lahore, Changez says

It seemed to me then—and to be honest, sir, seems to me still—that America was engaged only in posturing. *As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority.* And you acted out these beliefs on the

stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. *Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own.* (Hamid 106 Emphasis Mine)

As was shown earlier, Changez's disillusionment with the United States doesn't make him entirely antagonistic towards it. In fact, he confesses that once contact has been made between two foreign cultures, souls, etc. it is really impossible for both of them to go back to their previous state of not knowing each other, and this is one of the main reasons why he will never forget Erica/America. Therefore, what he is trying to tell the American is the fact that America should acknowledge the presence and the significance of the foreign in the country if it ever wants to make a comeback. In one of his last sentences in the novel Changez tells his listener, "Such journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be" (110), signifying the convergence that has occurred between the United States and the Middle East. Changez, then, tries to finish the conversation with the American on an almost reconciliatory note when he encourages him to forget about common stereotypes in exchange for him doing the same, "It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins" (115).

What Mohsin Hamid accomplishes in this novel should not be underestimated. One of the quotations mentioned above provides some real insight into how Americans reacted after 9/11, and we believe this is the key to understanding what went wrong in America's war on terror. Changez's sentence that America refrained from contemplating and acknowledging the pain it had suffered rings true on so many levels. The initial reaction in the US after 9/11 was a hasty one in which they only wanted to find those responsible and bring them to justice. However, as it is repeated numerous times throughout the novel, America's war on terror became increasingly intertwined with its financial interests in the Middle East. Consequently, the invasions undertaken by its military were not intended only to bring those responsible for the attacks to justice, but also to exploit the countries of the region in the name of fighting terrorism, and this required a widespread, influential media propaganda so that Americans and the allies of the United States would not object any kind of invasion of the Middle East. In fact, the way the American media represented Muslims, Middle Easterners, and immigrants, in general, paved the way for future exploitations that the US would carry out in the region. And it is Mohsen Hamid, a Pakistani writer who, like his protagonist, studied at Princeton, that captures this trend in American politics in his influential novel and tries to find a way to explain it to both Middle Easterners and the Americans. Hamid and his protagonist are social and cultural actors who are invited to use their knowledge of the US and the Middle East to correct a misunderstanding about people in that region, and this can be explained only in terms of what Alexander has taught us, i.e. the same event can mean different things for different groups of people because of the way they perceive it. For a person from the Middle East, 9/11 meant more suspicion and mindless association with terrorism, and that is why they felt the trauma of 9/11 even more than their American peers. Therefore, it could be argued that 9/11, which could be summarized as "invasion, xenophobia, fall, and rise again" for the white Americans, could be interpreted in terms of being surrounded and nostalgia for the Middle Easterners, especially those with dual citizenships. As was clear in the preceding pages, what happened to Changez is that after 9/11, his whole life is disrupted because he is surrounded by people who look at him as if he, too, is

a terrorist. Moreover, the dangerous nostalgia which is translated as a retreat into a fantasy of what it was like before it happened causes them even more troubles because life will never be the same for them. The life of those who reside in the US, as well as the lives of those who live in their home countries in the Middle East changed for the worse, and they are constantly trying to figure out how their lives would have been had 9/11 not happened.

Hamid's book is only one example of how a Muslim writer has addressed the complexity of the American society. Alaa al Aswany's *Chicago*, published in 2008, is another noteworthy novel that deals with some of the issues to which 9/11 gave rise, namely, the notion of how America can be a melting pot of cultures after the tragedy of September 11. Alaa Al Aswany is an Egyptian writer who studied Medicine at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Aswany rose to immediate fame after he published his debut novel, *The Yacoubian Building*. His second novel, entitled *Chicago*, is the story of a few Egyptian students who are studying at the University of Illinois, so like Hamid, he writes about the same university where he got his degree. Applying the same technique to Aswany's novel will hopefully allow us to see another instance of how a Muslim writer, who has spent a large portion of his life in the United States, represents the US and the encounter of Americans with Middle Eastern people.

We would like to start my analysis of Aswany's *Chicago* with a quotation from his first novel, *The Yacoubian Building* where he writes, "If you can't find good in your own country, you won't find it anywhere else" (Aswany and Davies 138). Aswany's preoccupation with Egyptian and Middle Eastern politics has led him away from his Medicine degree and towards a more active engagement with the interrelations between the West and the Middle East. The quotation above could have easily been taken from *Chicago*, which is a book in which he raises the same concerns over the definition of nations and their interconnectedness in today's world. One of the strongest assets of the novel is the wide range of characters who populate Aswany's novel. Whereas the main characters are all Egyptian and provide the readers with different viewpoints regarding politics in Egypt, one cannot simply deny the presence and the subsequent importance of American characters in the novel. The most important character of the novel, Ahmad studies medicine and also acts as a government spy because he wishes to become an influential figure back home. Aswany's treatment of Ahmad shows his aversion to what he does, especially when he undermines Ahmad through his wife's account of Ahmad. His political views are also contrasted with a more liberal, idealistic Egyptian, Nagi Abd al-Samad, who studies Mathematics in the United States. Intent on introducing a Westernized democracy to Egypt, Nagi tries to convince his friends and everyone he can get in touch with that the only way the Egyptian emigres in the West can ever return to their country is when a democracy replaces the Authoritarian government of Egypt. Probably one of the most influential passages of the book is when Nagi describes how human beings are closer in nature and spirit that they imagine, a sentiment which Aswany has shared elsewhere in his writing career, "A racist is just an ignorant man afraid of people who are different from him," (Aswany *The Automobile Club of Egypt*). Speaking about wars that are fought between the West and Middle East, Nagi says, "The soldier fights his enemies ferociously, wishing to annihilate them all. But if he were destined, just once, to cross to the other side and to walk among them, he would see one of them writing letters to his wife, another looking at his children's photos, and a third shaving and humming a tune" (Aswany *Chicago* 36). The realization that Nagi writes about in his diary is only possible when the two opposing parties can meet and get to know each other. Aswany echoes the same concern, through Nagi, that once the structural similarities have been established by two parties which are seemingly oppositional and incompatible, they can then build on that initial understanding in order to understand each other and work towards a better

understanding. Muhammad Salah is another character in this book who depicts a fully Americanized character who seems to be content with his life in the US even though his nostalgic yearning for a return to Egypt betrays his obvious nonchalance towards the country of his origin. These Egyptian characters are indeed best viewed when we see them interacting with their American friends and colleagues. Aswany succeeds in voicing the same kind of concerns over the US intervention in the Middle East as the ones that Hamid enumerates in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. As discussed earlier, *Chicago*'s main asset lies in its ability to analyze Egypt and Egyptians, as well as Islam, in an American setting. Therefore, most of the discussions which happen in the novel focus on how these different sets of characters look at things differently so much so that they are unable to see the common grounds they share.

One of the many issues that the characters of the novel discuss at length is the attacks of 9/11. September 11, which again has a central role in this novel, is first described as follows, "What led to September 11 is that most decision makers in the White House thought like you. They supported despotic regimes in the Middle East to multiply the profits of oil and arms companies, and armed violence escalated and reached our shores" (Aswany *Chicago* 17) and this realization becomes apparent throughout a discussion among Egyptian and American characters. Even though such discussions of broader political issues are important in the novel, the most important parts of the book are the discussions which focus on the personal lives and experiences of the characters. Shaymaa, for instance, is one of the characters who talks with Dr. Tariq about her experience of living in the US, and how, after 9/11, she is made to feel unwelcome and uncomfortable. At one point in her talk with Tariq, Shaymaa says, "I am completely alone here, Dr. Tariq. I have no friends or acquaintances. I don't know how to deal with the Americans. I don't understand them" (Aswany *Chicago* 57) which Tariq interprets as her inability to communicate properly in English. Of course, this is not the case. What Shaymaa is talking about is the fact that even though she can actually talk perfect English, and she has been in the US for quite some time, the post-9/11 conditions have made her life impossible simply because American people refuse to acknowledge her value as an individual and label her an outsider and a supporter of terrorism just because she is a Muslim. She later complains,

I feel I am an outcast in this country. Americans shy away from me because I am Arab and because I am veiled. At the airport they interrogated me as if I were a criminal. At school the students make fun of me when they see me. Did you see how that policeman treated me?... The image of Muslims here suffered a lot after 9/11... What have I done wrong? (*Chicago* 57)

To which Tariq responds, "Ordinary Americans know almost nothing about Islam. In their minds Islam is associated with terrorism and killing" (ibid.). These discussions among older and younger immigrants as well as their American friends are proof that the writer intended to explore how cultures with almost no contact with one another can sometimes become hostile towards each other simply because they don't have enough information about the other culture. In the same fashion as that of Changez in Hamid's book, when he asks the American tourist to forget about the stereotypical images of Muslims and Middle Easterners, Aswany's characters seem to move towards a better understanding of one another when they get to know each other even more. What is fascinating about the novel is the way the events and characters of the novel will force the readers to reevaluate their understanding of Islam by looking at how these seemingly outlandish characters resemble them. Most of the teachings of Islam, for instance, which are usually considered as too strict and demeaning will be interpreted quite differently

once the characters draw comparisons between those Islamic laws and some of the denominations of Christianity which are practiced in the US, especially in the South.

Moreover, another element of the novel which makes it a great post-9/11 story is the way Aswany tries to present the Western readers of the book with a window through which they can look at a Middle East with fresh eyes, and untainted by media. Aswany manages to incorporate two very important themes into the fabric of the novel, i.e. sexuality and politics. Even though the novel is trying to address a completely different kind of issue, the very representation of Muslims in the novel as people who can have sexual desires can sometimes prove new to Western audiences who usually believe that such desires are almost always repressed, especially on the part of women. Political awareness is also another issue which might surprise Western audiences because, once again, they just assume that Middle Eastern people are not politically conscious, let alone active. All in all, Aswany manages to correct many different misconceptions that exist about a country in the Middle East like Egypt, and he does so telling Western audiences how Middle Eastern people redefine themselves in the light of 9/11.

Other hyphenated Americans also achieve some form of the same thing with their works. What binds all of these hyphenated Americans together is their desire to right some wrong with how American people are introduced to exotic cultures from the Middle East right after the tragic events of September 11. The common theme in almost all of these works is the efforts of a character who has lived in both Middle East and America to convince the Americans that what they see in the media is a distorted image which has little or nothing to do with what is really going on in the Middle East and Muslim countries. And they try to achieve this by exploring how the events of 9/11 influence cultures differently. These writers usually partake of their first-hand knowledge of their respective countries, their customs and traditions, etc. in order to show the American audiences that sticking to tailored images of the media and the antagonizing rhetoric of politicians will blind them to the truth about Middle East and people who live there. To do so, these writers have to raise awareness about those cultures which seem foreign to Americans. Furthermore, they also have to attract people's attention to the way Muslims and Middle Easterners are at the risk of being mistreated after 9/11 as a result of the media and the government strategies of pigeonholing people because of a single, albeit tragic, incident.

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