



Identity Crisis in Post 9/11 Fiction

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Abstract

Fiction by outstanding writers like Don DeLillo, Mohsin Hamid and John Updike, have contributed to convoluted on-going conversations among political commentators and cultural critics about the meaning and uses of the Holocaust by placing literary texts within this cultural and political context. Literature, after the fall of the Twin Towers, define literature's perspective on September 11 and it shows the association between politics and aesthetics, and between history and narrative. There arose a new and emerging moreover reemerging racial, political, and socio-cultural discourse on identity related to terrorism and identity politics. It is observed that, these literary works reframe and focus on the meaning of 9/11 by employing emblematic strategies that accentuate the desire for and construction of meaning, and that embellish the continuing bang of 9/11 in the collective life of the United States and beyond. They were thrown into mayhem of identity crisis specifically, the South Asian American identities to understand culture, policy making, and the implicit gendered, socio-economic classification of minority identities within the discourse of globalization.

Key words: identity, crisis, American, self, binary, experience

The question of one's identity can never be solved with a simple answer, considering that it is constantly shifting, reshaping and rebuilding itself with every obstacle faced, crisis overcome and experience gained. The recent violence and crisis in Afghanistan has reasserted the precarious nature of one's existence and awakened the question of identity. The circle of events seems to be an unending cycle of horrors repeated in the kaleidoscopic rendition, beginning with US led invasion of Afghanistan, driving out the Taliban regime, months after the 9/11 attacks which al-Qaida orchestrated from Afghanistan while being sheltered by the Taliban and ending with Taliban regaining power and toppling government with relish. It is but a given that violence of any form has an effect not only in its proximity but also an ever

widening far reaching effect. This effect itself ranges from the observable political changes to the subtle changes that ensue in the subconscious. The identity crisis is one such outcome that materializes at various points in the violent history of mankind.

On September 11, the chronicle of mankind was besmirched with a terrorist attack that reshuffled the till then steady blocks of power dynamics. With the collapse of twin towers, the predominant narrative of identity, across the borders took a hit. As the story of terror of 9/11 began unfolding in the media, the lengthy process of reconstruction of the identity, an attempt to tackle fear, anger and to restore order and confidence in the wounded and maimed propelled. The twin towers that stood for American power and capitalism have now become a space for the

complex icon of the identity crisis. The event of 9/11, the need to understand the ramifications of the destruction and the need to mourn for the dead struggles with the possibilities of being misrepresented or politicised and remain true to the calamity itself. The literary representations of 9/11 are bound to the event itself and its aftermath, there are many instances of literary texts portraying the emotional responses of post 9/11 a juggling on the tight rope of reality, facts and imagination. Literature here becomes like a crutch to move forward while dealing with the unspeakable and to compensate for the unrepresentable in the outcome of 9/11. Fiction by the well-known writers like John Updike, Ian McEwan, Don DeLillo, Art Spiegelman and many others have contributed to the perspective of 9/11 and its connection with identity crisis.

The emerging narratives of fiction also have certain conflicting views where the event has divided the narration into two voices of identity, the polarized narration of the American self and the Terrorist Other. While discourses on conflict and differences already existed, the emerging fiction have at times been reduced to portray 9/11 as the event that led to the irreconcilable difference between these polarized identities. For many Americans, their identity has been permanently altered and through them the identity of the others have also undergone a change. While an entire generation has matured in the absence of the Twin Towers, the very anomaly of its absence has opened up the consequent instability and reinvention of identities that were chained to the symbolic nature of the Towers. In this narration, through the fictionalized identities, the trauma of 9/11 is recreated in the world of text. Thus the fictional identities begin with a connection to a space and with its connection a certain stability that gets destabilized with the traumatic event. For example, consider Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, where the narration is split into the binary experience of a protagonist functioning as a whole with his connection to the city and its wholeness and in the aftermath of 9/11 where the shattered city is reflection of the fragmented identity of the protagonist, showing the impact of the fall. In the

ensuing disarray, the shattered identity of Keith wants to hold on to the past where this trauma has not yet darkened his door and in trying to skip this turmoil, he subconsciously reaches the house of his ex-wife. Here the unbroken relationship coincides with a time that pre-exists the traumatic event of 9/11. The struggle of the identity in trying to hold on to its completeness can be seen in the brief moment of clarity that Keith has in realising where he has arrived. This incoherence exhibited by Keith illustrates how the identity of the traumatic victim falls into this interim space where the coherence is now inaccessible and the linear timeline has been disrupted to establish a narrative of pre trauma and post trauma. In the beginning itself, the shock of the events disintegrates Keith where his own narration has a certain detachment and awe of a victim,

'He heard the sound of the second fall,...That was him coming down, the north tower.'
(DeLillo 1).

It can be established that while the identity is never static, the jarring event and the resultant trauma issues a shift from the stabilised to a loss of personal identity to create a certain detachment from the proximity of the occurrence and its aftershock.

Literature post 9/11 also has certain similarities to the long established conventions of postcolonial novels wherein the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them'. In the *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid exemplifies the identity based issues faced by a Muslim immigrant in America. To a person already alienated by the geographical distance and culture, the dreams of establishing a new progressive successful self constantly grapples with the guilt of staying away from the homeland and moving away from ones known self, in a bid to create a 'new' acceptable self. In the backdrop of 9/11, this conflict is surpassed by the emerging identity of a terrorist that is automatically established on the basis of religion and ethnic roots. For Changez, the combination of his personal problems and the situation post 9/11 fuel an identity crisis about who he is and where he belongs. The conflict of his identity is further heightened when he falls in love

with 'Erica', a feminine representation of glittering, out of reach America that is indifferent to the third world concerns. Through the fading and damaged 'Erica', who never truly accepts Changez, Hamid has portrayed an America that is in grips of its nostalgic past and incapable of fully embracing an immigrant.

In trying to come to terms with his identity, the mere decision of shaving his beard and having to face the turmoil of denouncing his brethren by this act, creates a remarkable identity crisis. He has to deal with it privately in trying to keep up the appearance of an untroublesome immigrant. The conflict is then resolved with his decision to keep the beard and thus changing his identity from the 'curbed' to the 'unreined' with this tiny step. Thus a perplexity has been added to the identity of 'self'. In the narration, Changez finally embraces his 'other' self to overcome this identity crisis. Hamid through Changez illustrates the downward spiral of a Princeton graduate that ensues as an outcome of identity crisis in the already volatile situation when the scales of balance topples with resounding explosion of the Twin Towers.

Thus the protagonist manages to salvage his fragmented identity and indeed forge a unified identity; it is however done by embracing his fundamentalist self.

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