

# Reading History, Crisis And Cultural Trauma Of 9/ 11 In Khakpour's; The Last Illusion

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## Abstract

Major historical events change the course of life and thinking, 9/11 is one of them as discourses were constructed and reconstructed after this horrific incident. In Post 9/11 Scenario, the discourse of fear, fright and trauma was emerged at large. The leading fiction writers from America and the world attempted to rewrite the memory of 9/11 and urged for a move of social and civic justice to the minorities. The present study explores the theme of erasing crisis and illusions of cultural trauma of 9/11 in Khakpour's novel, The Last Illusion. The theoretical insights have been taken from Alexander (2013), Towards the Theory of Cultural Trauma and Craps (2013) Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds. The textual analysis reveals that cultural trauma in American society is not only a Post 9/11 manifestation but even it existed in Pre 9/11 times as America has been stumbling in chaos and uncertainties for so long. The American world in the novel seems to be scary both in pre and post 9/11 times. Zal a feral child -the protagonist of the novel, remains an outsider in the American society because despite their society's tall claims about democracy they have been unable to accommodate the ones who are not the insiders of it. Ultimately, it remains at the edge of its fall. The incident of 9/11 proved an evident of such social hollowness in American culture. Zal, the protagonist of the novel urges for erasing the illusions of chaos and cultural trauma in the American society against chaos and trauma. The present study unveils the historical event documented in the form of fiction and highly significant to understand human life tragedies.

**Key Words:** History, 9/11 discourses, tragedies, illusions, trauma and resilience.

## Introduction

Discourses record history and manifest significant events that reflect all that have been done in the past therefore reading these discourses take us to the world existed before the major event and its aftermath. 9/11 had been the most burning issue in the past decade and changed the entire fabric of world. Fictional discourses reveal as well as document the history and turmoil of the age thus this study explain the traumas of post 9/11 scenario through the characterization which impersonate the real

characters. The leading theme after 9/11 had been trauma as the world in reality faced this ordeal in real. Trauma is as old as is the human history. Since ancient times, man has had to contend with grave dangers, injuries, and shocks, such as earthquakes, floods, deaths, illnesses, and conflicts (Alexander, 2013). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries a sharp rise in the phenomenon of trauma has been seen. The First and Second World Wars in the 20th century transformed the human being into a creature that must endure loss and pain. The globe appeared to

be more of a hollow and desolate place to dwell during and after World Wars I and II. The 9/11 catastrophe similarly led the general people to conclude that the globe is not a safe place to live in with peace and happiness in the 21st century. Trauma, according to Fassin and Rechtman (2009), has emerged as one of the most significant cultural and psychic markers of our time. Trauma has established itself as a standard method of investigation in relation to rape, torture, enslavement, and terrorist acts in the realm of literary theory and mode(s) of representation. In this sense, the 9/11 incident has been regarded as one of those occurrences that demonstrated a historical rupture in American history and questioned the idea of American exceptionalism. The discourse of trauma was likely sparked by the fall of the Towers and the planes, which generated a unique discourse of panic, anxiety, fright, and disorder. Media and other social meaning-making actors have chronicled this language of terror and violence. The trauma of 9/11 sorted its position in American cultural entities, social theory, national memory, and history. It turned out to be a turning point for the United States and the rest of the globe, especially for Muslims (alleged culprits and the "other" of the West/Center), and it changed social theory in the years after 9/11. It can be claimed that America resurrected the idea of "the West and the Rest" this time with an emphasis on race, ethnicity, and Muslim scrutiny (Seidler, 2013). The United States became so rigorous on the name of national security that its efforts of social securitization further contributed to a lasting trauma and increased uncertainty around the world. Both America and the rest of the globe were extremely concerned about such uncertainties. Numerous research that are pertinent to the 9/11 catastrophe have proposed various causes for the event. What has been forgotten is that these terrifying uncertainties persisted long before 9/11 because of American illusions of being developed and super power.

The incident of 9/11 was more than just the ongoing hostility between the United States and the Taliban. On the following grounds, the 9/11 catastrophe was highly unusual. It served as a symbol of American foreign policy of exclusion. It was the fallacy of American claims as super power. The power between the "center" and the "margin" had been reversed. The idea that terrorists were claiming the power that America once claimed before 9/11 seemed bizarre to those who read about the disaster both on the day of the tragedy and even later.

Political scientists interpreted Osama Bin Laden's remark that "What America is experiencing now, we have tasted it scores of years before" more in terms of power politics and its inversion (Podobnik, 2005). The Post-9/11 American society was transformed from a promised to a forbidden land due to the gaping hole created by orientalist binaries, illusions, and memories of America. As a result, it made it harder for different identities to coexist in American culture. The current study tries to identify the underlying conflicts, doubts, and illusions between the first World (America) and the third world that pervaded American society and ultimately contributed to the 9/11 disaster in Porochista Khakpour's novel *The Last Illusion*. The strategy of the present study is to consider Khakpour's proposed call for eradicating these illusions in order to heal from the cultural trauma of 9/11. Nearly all of the characters in the novel don't seem normal, but they all work to create a normal order. Each character is filled with a fixated memory or illusion that they are all trying to escape. The present study analyses history of the 9/11 event with reference to different tragedies experienced by the people and helps the readers to understand the complexity of the issue.

### **Literature Review**

In response to the events of September 11, 2001, a new genre of fiction emerged that questioned Americans claims as to be "universal and

enlightened" and its exclusionary policy toward "the other" (Mirsepassi, 2000). A fictional (literary) work might try to address the possibility of fresh global uncertainties. Even after 9/11, the first pressing need that was recognized was to theorize the disaster rather than produce literature. The survivors of the 9/11 catastrophe were left with little choice but to pick up the pieces and carry on living in the aftermath of the tragedy. It made an effort to depict the discourse of normalcy (Golimowska, 2016). After 9/11, a lot of fiction was written to describe, consider, reproduce, and theorize the 9/11 catastrophe. There were produced 1433 works of non-fiction and nearly 164 works of fiction. There was an expanding list of special issues of many publications in the academic and research fields. Themes in Post-9/11 fiction have covered wide ranging issues concerning the questions from lay men to intellectuals, such as "What has happened to the American" and "How can we come out of such tragedy?" Identity, history, brutality, war, and terrorism have been the main topics of the fiction in Post 9/11 times. In the instance of 9/11, the representation of media has been different from fiction as a venue of articulation of terrorism and social chaos. The loss, bleeding bodies, and collapsing structures were often depicted in the media. According to studies, those who did not directly experience the catastrophe of 9/11 but later witnessed it on television and in the newspaper experienced the same sufferings as those who faced it in actual sense. According to Derrida, the incident was mediated by the "information machine," which is to say, the official discourse and media frenzy that quickly appropriated and essentially formed it as a modern event that was considered to be traumatizing (Borradori, 2013).

When comparing the Post 9/11 discourse in media and fiction, it can be distinguished between two distinct fundamental tendencies of representation. It is not a matter to be biased against any of these representational i.e. media

and fiction. It can be implied that both medium have advantages and disadvantages based on their fundamental tendencies. Media representations cannot be exact replicas of fiction, and media cannot be layered over fiction. The media's portrayal of the tragedy's anguish was more an event based and psychological one. For those who weren't there, it provided a visual representation of the catastrophe. Media outlets were successful in portraying it as a cultural trauma due to the large audience.

This is how the 9/11 catastrophe came to be regarded as a psychiatric and culturally traumatic. In addition to these stereotypes and misrepresentations of the perpetrators that were created as a result of the 9/11. The construction of the event as a cultural trauma destroyed American social democratic norms. Fiction writers failed to recreate the thought of the "other" in regard to 9/11 as part of their immediate literary response to the 9/11 disaster because they were too focused on the Western psyche. As a result, they began to portray the "other" negatively. Delillo's *The Falling Man* (2008), can be referred as for comprehension and reference.

But as time went on, a different subgenre of Post 9/11 literature emerged with a propensity to unravel this mystery by addressing the issue of cultural trauma. The creation of a "third space" where both America and the perpetrators may witness the cross-cultural pain was sought for in this subgenre of Post 9/11 fiction and this genre of writing presented a different portrayal of a Muslim character. In these works, Muslim characters have also been shown as suffering from cultural trauma.

Numerous novels have also addressed the personal and psychological pain of the victims. The Post-9/11 fiction increased public awareness of the enormous loss that the globe must rebuild as a result of historical tragedy. Poetry, plays, non-fiction, and other forms of writing have all been used by both American and non-American

writers to address the complexity and wide-ranging effects of 9/11. However, given the variety of techniques, the most astonishing literary studies are found in novelistic form. When it refers to the genre and form of the fiction as the most appropriate media, it means that novels have a wide variety of characters and the ability to view things and topics on a larger scale. Unfortunately, the researchers have not yet produced a study that is entirely devoted to closely analyzing how post-9/11 literature documents the history and responds to the problem of cultural trauma. The present study emphasizes the healing and renegotiating viewpoints of Post 9/11 fiction. Critics have not been concentrating on how the Post 9/11 fiction has redrawn the image of Islam, particularly in terms of how this change has had measurable consequences on the identity and lives of the moderate Muslims living in the West, in order to address the idea of terrorism and its effects. Unfortunately, the researchers have not attempted to explore this healing potential of fiction in South Asian literature. The goal of the current study is to examine Post 9/11 fiction as a vehicle for expressing the horrors of culturally traumatic boundaries and the building of a third space for harmony by fiction writers, among whom Porochista Khakpour is one.

### **Post-9/11 Fiction Subgenre: A Discourse of Normalcy**

The 9/11 occurrence was unimaginable, unheard of, and unrepresentative all at once. Many people still find it difficult to comprehend how four planes that were taking off from various airports at the same time were hijacked and collided with the World Trade Center. It wasn't that bad when the first plane collided with the North Tower. People mistook it for an aeroplane crash incident. Even the initial explanation that media journalists gave to audiences was that a jet had unintentionally crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. However, a few minutes

after the initial collision, another plane collided with the South Tower, revealing the intention and shocking not only America but the entire globe. The happening of such a horrifying disaster and the terrorists' goals are still beyond the comprehension of the common and intellectuals. Everyone found the manner in which this tragedy occurred to be highly unbelievable both at the time it occurred and even many years later. By unprecedented, it means that neither the American public nor the rest of the globe have ever seen anything like it in their respective national histories. Even historical hijacking cases seem to be somewhat demand-driven. The planes were released when these criteria were met. Unreasonable acts of terrorism include the hijacked airliner colliding with the Twin Towers without any notification to or contact from the American government. This is what distinguishes the 9/11 occurrence as being unheard of. Some historians referred to it as a "holocaust for America," using that catastrophe as a benchmark for gauging public outrage (Simpson, 2006). But the element of sudden happening of the 9/11 makes it unprecedented in comparison to the genocide and massacre of holocaust. The holocaust happened over years, while the incident of 9/11 happened in moments.

By the term "unrepresented," it means that before the 9/11 disaster, no similar incidence of bleeding bodies and rising smoke storms had ever been covered by the media. As a result, the media's pictorial depiction of the catastrophe quickly spread psychological pain across America. The media was the only source of information. The public's collective psyche was impacted by the horrific news stories that kept repeating over and over again with images of burning bodies and collapsing towers. As a result, the 9/11 catastrophe evolved from a case of psychic trauma to one of societal and cultural trauma. On the other hand, fiction could not accurately portray photographic reality in the same way that media could. Post-9/11 fiction's

only concentration was on exploring the fallout from this event.

### **Framework**

According to Kivisto (2021), America should not include the suffering of "other" people while considering the pain and sorrow caused by 9/11. Both Craps (2013) and Alexander (2013), have noted that it would be a grave error to view the trauma as a privileged model for the West/America. According to Craps, trauma theory is only holistic when it considers the suffering of non-Western people as well. The majority of the 9/11 literary canon is made up of accounts of unremarkable, unconcerned, and virtuously understated American lives that were cruelly cut short by the destruction in Manhattan. The first batch of novels focused on the domestic front attempted to domesticate the catastrophe and develop a language for better comprehending horror and loss. However, there are certain authors, including Amy Waldman and Porochista Khakpour, who have dedicated their novels to eradicating the social trends that served as a key contributing factor to the 9/11 catastrophe. The majority of Post-9/11 fiction made the case that it was urgent to identify the mechanisms that may still bring the American people together despite this tragedy. This genre also aimed to look beyond the 'Us vs. Them' performative and emotionally charged national classifications (O'Gorman, 2015). The fiction served as a counter narrative to the political stance of the Americans opposing humanitarian operations. Literature is the ideal medium for traumatic representations, according to Alexander (2013), who views it as a reflection of society and culture. Literature serves as the most comprehensive kind of trauma representation since cultural trauma is more of a manifestation of the collective unconscious. As a means of expression, Post-9/11 literature offered an alternative canon to the 9/11 catastrophe (represented the trauma of victim and perpetrators). According to Craps (2013), cultural

trauma's decolonization is necessary in order to understand the suffering of the underprivileged.

### **Textual Analysis**

The Last Illusion (2014) by Porochista Khakpor tells the tale of Zal, an Iranian-born wild boy whose insane mother abandons him because she is appalled by the hue of his skin. Mother of Zal believes she gave birth to a "White Demon." She imprisoned him in a birdcage where he consumes insects, bird feed, and squats while reading the paper. Hendricks, an American behavioral analyst, later adopts him. The future of humans in New York gives Zal a boost in terms of his feeling of humanity. His girlfriend Asiya is with whom he does his human experimentation. His innate desire to be a bird, however, prevents him from being fully human.

Despite coexisting with humans, Zal was ignorant of social conventions. His hybrid persona emerges as a result, both biologically and socially. As an outsider in New York, Zal runs into difficulty. His association with a well-known illusionist who says he can fly like a bird causes mayhem in Zal's life. He constantly teeters on the brink of collision and destruction. The Last Illusion (2014), centers on the idea of innate imaginations that prevent people from escaping their memories and illusions. The political metaphor in the novel, The Last Illusion refers to 9/11, its carnage, and the pain it caused.

### **Hypocrisy and Traumatic Lineage**

All the characters in the novel The Last Illusion (2014) point the image of some inherent illusions. Such illusions make their relation with each other and the society as stumbling one. It later on, results in trauma and chaos. Khanum as a mother develops an unjustified illusion about the white color to such an extent that she even abandons her baby- Zal and does not behave as she is expected to behave as a mother. Hendricks though adopts Zal so that he may grow as a normal human being seems erratic by the end of the novel. Silber who

is the famous American illusionist always imagines the disappearance of the world trade center. On account of these illusions it can be established that all the characters could not move to the development of a normal, peaceful and homogenized end.

The fact that one is born white is not horrifying. Khanum, however, who is deeply deluded, abandons her child. Since the novel's beginning, it has been seen as a registration of confusion and anxiety. This novel is more an effort to decolonize the American fear and chaos-based trauma industry. It raises awareness in American society and dismantles the nation's policing approach toward minorities. "His father had set it all up...and would not have provided a strange atmosphere for his son...considering how desperately Hendricks wanted his son to grow up as normal as he could (Khakpour,2014). Hendricks' persona serves as more of a metaphor for overcoming abnormality. Hendricks believes that it would be wonderful if Zal lived a normal life, just like everyone else, in an effort to erase Zal's memories and delusions. Zal, whom, Khakpour, portrays as scared, drunken, and misogynistic, challenges our understanding of what is normal in American society. After the illusion, Zal understands that a smile is just another human trick of normalcy like so many other things (Khakpour, 2014). In light of the ongoing uncertainty in American culture, Zal's smile on 9/11 is noteworthy. The American society's sense of modernity and promises of prosperity are retreated by Zal's smile. It is clear that Hendricks was unable to instill human qualities in Zal because of Silber's delusions.

Post-9/11 literary scenario has evolved the theme and characters of displaced others and pain both within America and out of America i.e. Non-Western globe since the events of September 2001. Such displaced people are the result of American society's discursive social stratification. To be more specific, "decentered ones" become the victims of chaos and trauma

when center is unable to support its edges. America had experienced the same thing. In Khakpour's *The Last Illusion* (2014), where the 9/11 events are incorporated into a greater web of events, the paradigm of the dislocated other gets radicalized. The entire novel follows Zal, from his childhood as a feral boy who was made to live in a cage with birds by his mother, to his adoption by an American named Hendricks who is determined to give Zal a "normal" existence in the neocolonial city of New York at the start of the twenty-first century. On the way, he catches paths with magician Bran Silber, known for his ability to fly, just before he performs the biggest illusion he has yet to pull off (the disappearance of the World Trade Center).

Zal's experience is both thrilling and transformative because, rather than awakening his avian instincts, he seems to be more in touch with one of the emotions that make up the essence of humanity. Zal finds his existence becoming more and more difficult in the early days of 2001, despite efforts to soothe his innate desires and give him a sense of relief. Asiya's crises and the challenges of adjusting to living in a dysfunctional relationship are combined with the challenges of adjusting to a regular life. This entire web of emotions creates a social environment that the individuals who lived through it in the wake of the 9/11 attacks encountered.

In fact, as the 9/11 events approach, a sense of defeat seems to permeate Zal and Asiya's strained relationship. Zal does not react in worry or anxiety despite Asiya's "visions" and their rising level of accuracy (she names Manhattan as the location of something dangerous to come), saying, "Let it come. Whatever it is, let it reach Manhattan. I won't be halting it in your view (Khakpour, 2014,). This is not merely a result of Zal's abandonment of Asiya and his belief that she has lost all control over this innate aspect of her character; one may also credit Zal's renunciation to his own inability to entirely

integrate into the urban environment of the New York city. Such a rejection is a reflection of the 'Other' aspect of Zal's identity as well as the fact that he was unable to secure a long-term work and still feels removed from the concerns of the average American.

Zal still receives a lot of criticism for being an outsider despite his desire to fit in and the attempts he makes to do so since he can't get rid of the intuitive, native aspect of his personality. Because they are able to attribute the feeling of madness to this individual and his objectives, the characters appear to express satisfaction upon learning of Bran Silber's intended illusion. The word "insanity" is a good way to describe Silber's endeavor as one learns about his concerns for what he is going to accomplish.

Silber appears to be thinking on his upcoming action without considering the greater significance of his performance under the cover of "The Fall of the Towers," which he initially dismisses due to its ambiguity and by emphasizing the catastrophe rather than the illusion itself. Although his intention to perform a renowned deception is evident, he seems to be confused about the true significance of his gesture. A telling idea occurs to him as he thinks of people entering and exiting the World Trade Center: "He found his mind wandering as he watched the businessmen, janitors, restaurant staff, and merchants' stream in and out of work at the WTC, with a feeling of purpose. He realized that he envied them after wondering what their world was truly like (Khakpour, 2014, p. 256). It emphasizes how it appears like individuals are aimlessly walking about the World Trade Center. Silber wants to make the World Trade Center as invisible as possible because all the characters seem to be going toward a disaster.

### **Forgetting and Normalization**

The biological hybridity of Zal and the cultural and social context of America as a distribution hub are artistically related by Khakpour. Zal's

imitating and laughter combine Silber's last phantasm of 9/11 and the Collapsing Towers. Zal believes that laughter is the secret to avoiding turmoil. The Last Illusion, which exploits a long-standing Oriental narrative backbone upon which the problems of the Western core are placed and analysed, so seems to be the ultimate post-9/11 hybrid text. The initial shock and amazement caused by the disappearance of the Twin Towers, however, prompts a fundamental change in how Zal and the rest of the world perceive New York City at that precise moment. The most perfect illustration of the anguish of losing First Worldism, a crucial component of post-9/11 literature, is the scene of New York City enveloped in fear and shock.

According to Crockatt (2007), the social hollowness in America is a result of the country's delusion of exceptionalism and first-world status. Where non-Americans, or persons like Zal, have not been accepted into American culture. Chaos and uncertainty are constant challenges for Zal. It can be observed here that the characters were residing in the periphery of modernity even before the 9/11 disaster and were anticipating a similar event to occur. According to Khakpour, Asiya is both an American and a Muslim. Such a mixed identity would encourage an inclusionary policy in American culture. Without further filling its mind and head with orientalist binary thinking, America should work to regain its lost standing as a truly worldwide culture and nation.

### **Conclusion**

The study concluded that Khakpour (2014), has accurately depicted America as a victim society even before September 11, 2001. Zal shenanigans in multiple directions. When he observes the agony of the society that failed to accept him, he smiles with satisfaction. His identity as an "other" in American society could not be erased by American society. This type of laughter also serves to mock America's assertion of

exceptionalism. According to the study's findings, there should be less disparity between first worldism and third worldism. The novel *Last Illusion* establishes a connection to foster a feeling of civic equality in American culture as a result.

The novel also raises the issue of citizenship (international citizenship). In order to prevent a future crisis, the story's narrator Zal urges the development of a safe line between two opposing cultural poles. The *Last Illusion* is a novel that explores the traumatizing effects of modernity's pervasive fringe in America. In the social scene of American society, all of the novel's characters are the victims of elimination. Zal is treated like a person of lower status and is not noticed. The invisible systemic inequity that permeates American society is depicted in the novel, *The Last Illusion*. It suggests productively re-imaginings in the American society so that American may come out of communal violence which resulted in the tragedy of 9/11.

The novel suggests that because America failed to uphold social and democratic values, it fell apart on September 11, 2001. The novel makes the argument that maintaining the "social collective" is necessary to prevent calamities in order to prevent collisions on both an individual and cultural level. *The Last Illusion* is a novel that demonstrates how American culture has increasingly become a chaotic social environment. Zal consistently works toward the possibility of living in New York in the future, but the novel ends there, which is unfortunate. In order to draw a conclusion, it is compelling to say that the novel represents a step towards healing from the creation of cultural trauma.

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