

(NEO-) ORIENTALISM IN POST-9/11 FICTION AND FILM

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By

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Introduction

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 are etched into the memories of many people inside and outside the U.S. Not only did the attacks shock citizens all over the world, they also inspired artists and writers. The artistic and literary works produced in response to the attacks and their aftermath became the topic of a cultural and critical debate about how to deal with and write about the attacks. The representation of the so-called Muslim “Other,” people of non-Western descent who are followers of the Islamic faith, is one of the issues addressed in this debate. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, post-9/11 fiction and film responded to the (neo)-Orientalist political discourse and stereotyping that dominated Fox News and other conservative media, and the discriminatory measures that followed the Patriot Act of October 2001, in different ways. Some writers and film directors reproduce the stereotypical image of the “Other” as dangerous, which is typical for an Orientalist view, while others challenge these stereotypes and Orientalism in general.

In this thesis, I will analyze the representation of the Muslim “Other” in two movies and two novels: British director Paul Greengrass’ movie *United 93* (2006), South African director Gavin Hood’s movie *Rendition* (2007), U.S. author Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), and Pakistani-British writer Nadeem Aslam *The Blind Man’s Garden* (2013). This combination of four works is intended to show a variety of interpretations of and perspectives on the 9/11 attacks among international writers and film directors. I will investigate if, and if so, to what extent, these four works succeed in countering Orientalist preconceptions and stereotypes, or if, instead, they reinforce and perpetuate them.

Several literary scholars have criticized the literary works that were published in the decade after 9/11 for failing to address the international context of the attacks. In his ground-breaking article “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis” (2009), Richard Gray initiated the debate by discussing how American literature has changed since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. He points out that one possible way of dealing with 9/11 is in terms of trauma. Following Freud and more recently Cathy Caruth, he defines trauma as “an event the full horror of which is not and cannot be experienced at the time, but only belatedly” (Gray 129). This event cannot be integrated into narrative memory until it is narrated to a witness, which is the first step towards working through the trauma. According to Gray, however, 9/11 literature tends to focus on the preliminary stage of trauma, with an emphasis on its symptoms such as nightmares and dissociation, rather than working through trauma.

Moreover, Gray argues that 9/11 fiction “domesticated” the crisis that was created by the event, because it primarily focuses on and takes the perspective of American characters who suffer a personal trauma as a result of the attacks. Instead he proposes alternative “imaginary structures” to bear witness to the trauma of 9/11 and its consequences (134). Pointing out (in 2009) that the existing 9/11 fiction fails to engage the position of the “Other” in any depth, Gray proposes that 9/11 fiction look at the events from an immigrant perspective. He argues that 9/11 literature fails to imaginatively capture the position of the “Other,” criticizing its “encounter with strangeness.” He encourages writers to shift their focus to “the bigger picture” instead of writing in “familiar oppositions such as ‘us vs. them’” (135). He calls for a “deterritorialisation” of 9/11 literature, for example by taking the perspective of the immigrant.

In his article “A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray” (2009), Michael Rothberg agrees with Gray’s argument that post-9/11 fiction fails to move beyond the preliminary stages of trauma, tends to focus on the domestic, even sentimental at times (Rothberg 152). While Gray suggests a turn toward fictions of immigration, Rothberg argues that this might actually cause a form of re-domestication (155), since it would still be set within U.S. borders. He proposes instead looking at 9/11 from an international perspective and focusing on “international relations and extraterritorial citizenship” (153). Rothberg argues that retaining the U.S. as the cultural space in which the novels are set, as Gray suggests, could actually reproduce “American exceptionalism and ignore the context out of which the terror attacks emerged” (157). He thus proposes to “pivot away from the homeland and seek out a literature of extraterritoriality” (158). Lucy Bond, like Gray and Rothberg, points out that the main theme in post-9/11 literature is the American citizens’ experience of the 9/11 trauma. According to Bond, this fascination with the “intimate consequences for individual Americans” averts the attention away from the international consequences of the attacks, a tendency that precedes the 9/11 attacks (737-38). Her main critique is that this focus on trauma victimizes the U.S. and thus can be used as an excuse by the U.S. government to justify its aggressive military response to the attacks, by first invading Afghanistan and then Iraq (747).

All three critics suggest that the 9/11 genre fails in its encounter with the cultural, and especially the Muslim, “Other” and neglects the opportunity to take an international or immigrant perspective of the events. The stereotypical portrayal of Muslims as Islamic extremists in post-9/11 films and novels is a much-debated topic. The representation of the Oriental “Other” in Western discourse for decades has been

a subject associated with the work of Edward Said. In his now classic study *Orientalism* (1978), Said defines Orientalism as a “style of thought” based upon the acceptance of “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts [in the West] concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on” (Said 2). While Said focuses on the ways Orientalism enabled European culture to “manage” and dominate the Orient (which includes the Middle East, Asia and North Africa) “during the post-Enlightenment period” (Said 3), Malreddy Pavan Kumar and others have pointed out that, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there was a revival of Orientalism in the West in a slightly altered form, sometimes called neo-Orientalism (Kumar, Khalid). Said’s theory and critique of Orientalism and its post-9/11 significance will be dealt with in chapter one, which will also engage the criticism Said’s theory received.

The discussion of Orientalism will be the framework for a critical analysis in the second chapter of the movies *United 93* and *Rendition*, which approach the topic of 9/11 in contrasting ways. *United 93* focuses on American heroism and portrays the Muslim “Other” as dangerous, whereas *Rendition*, which is largely set in the Middle East, features a diverse and complex set of Arab characters, thus taking a more international approach. *United 93* seeks to tell the story as it actually happened on board of the hijacked flight that crashed in a rural area in Pennsylvania as a result of the passengers’ intervention. The realistic, almost documentary style of narration aims to engage the viewers, but does not thoroughly investigate the narrative of the terrorists. *Rendition*, on the other hand, reels the viewer in by narrating the personal story of an American of Arab descent, who is - probably falsely - accused of being complicit in a terrorist bombing. Each movie captures the viewer’s attention, yet

gives an entirely different view of the “Other.” In *United 93* the terrorists seem more dangerous and unpredictable, which are typically Orientalist views, while in *Rendition* the Muslim characters, even the religious extremists among them, are portrayed as complex humans.

In the final chapter I will analyze Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and Nadeem Aslam’s *The Blind Man’s Garden*. *Falling Man* revolves around the white American character Keith, who is a severely traumatized victim of the attacks, which have an great impact on him and his family. The novel addresses the symptoms of trauma, such as flashbacks and depression, through its storyline and writing style. As Gray and Rothberg point out, the novel dwells on the causes and consequences of the characters’ trauma, yet does not address the context of the events of 9/11. The novel switches between three focalizers: Keith, his wife Lianne, and the terrorist Hammad. Comparing and contrasting these chapters will shed light on the novel’s underlying presumptions about the “Other,” and how they are connected to Neo-Orientalism. *The Blind Man’s Garden*, the most recent of the four works I will discuss, is set entirely outside the borders of the U.S., in contrast to earlier works, namely in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Almost all the characters are Muslim, enabling the Western reader to experience the consequences of the 9/11 attacks through the eyes of non-Western and culturally different citizens. All characters have to deal with death and conflict in their lives, and are in some way traumatized. While the other two works under discussion create a distinction between the traumatized American characters and the terrorists, Aslam tries to bridge the gap between the East and the West, which is symbolized by the Muslim protagonist’s reconciliation with an American soldier.

Taking as my point of departure the critical debate initiated by Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg, I will argue that a distinction can be made between novels and films that focus on either personal trauma or individual or collective American heroism, such as *Falling Man* and *United 93*, and those that take an international and explicitly political perspective of the attacks of 9/11 and their impact, such as *Rendition* and *The Blind Man's Garden*. While the former to some extent reinforce Orientalist stereotypes, the latter attempt to refute them. I will argue that, even though none of the works can be put into one or the other category conclusively, the earlier *Falling Man* and *United 93* represent the Islamic characters, significantly all terrorists, as racial and/or cultural "Others" and therefore display strong characteristics of Neo-Orientalism, while the later *Rendition* and *The Blind Man's Garden* feature a wide variety of Islamic characters and take a critical stand towards Neo-Orientalism as well as to U.S. foreign policy and the effects of the so-called War on Terror, not only on U.S. citizens but also on numerous people in other parts of the world.

Chapter 1

Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism

Orientalism is a term used by historians and scholars to identify Eastern cultures as depicted by the West. The West in this case generally refers to the U.S. and Europe, while the East includes the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. The term usually separates the Islamic cultures in the East from the Christian West. Traditionally, Orientalism points to everything that concerns the East; thus Orientalists are scholars who study the East. Edward Said was the first critic to connect Orientalism to Western prejudices towards the East. Said's book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, sketches a situation in which the West created a negative image of the East to benefit itself. Said's book attracted both praise and criticism by Western and Oriental scholars, and was highly influential in and outside postcolonial studies. The attacks of 9/11 inspired scholars to review Orientalism with renewed interest. Due to this revision, theories of Neo-Orientalism were formulated in relation to the cultural responses to the attacks.

Orientalism unexpectedly became a tremendous success. In *The Edward Said Reader*, Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin point out that initially Said had trouble finding a publisher for his book. Some publishers did "not consider the book groundbreaking," and others were "unwilling to back a book whose politics were at odds with the mainstream's view of Palestinians, Arabs and Israel" (63). Despite these initial setbacks *Orientalism* became the cultural colossus we now know. Conor McCarthy links Said's views, as outlined in *Orientalism*, to his personal background. Said was born in Jerusalem and grew up and was educated in Palestine, Egypt, and America. This "variegated cultural heritage was always shot through in complex

ways by the often-violent geopolitical changes that shaped Said's world from his birth onward" (McCarthy 7). Said lived in and adapted to several cultures, which makes him a "Christian Arab, raised in the Middle-East, yet Western-educated" (Sprinkler 3). This multicultural personal background gives Said's theory an extra dimension, and maybe even credibility, for he possesses first-hand experience of both Western and Eastern culture.

In *Orientalism* Said's main argument is that the West represents the East on the basis of on its own values, thus creating a distorted image of the East. Said describes Orientalism as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (1). He defines Orientalism as a "style of thought" based upon the acceptance of "the basic distinction between East and West" (2). He starts with examining the work of a number of scholars such as Cromer and Balfour, to put the history of Orientalism in context. Said regards the Orient that is presented through Orientalism as "a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire" (Said 203).

One of Said's points of criticism towards the Orientalist tradition is that the West looks upon the East as static (106). Said argues that the East is capable of change, but Orientalists simply ignore this fact because it does not fit their static definition of the East. Moreover, the West dehumanizes the citizens of the Orient in order to control them. As Said argues, "a white middle-class Westerner believes it is his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it, just because by definition 'it' is not quite as human as 'we' are" (108). This suggests that, according to Said, the West stereotypes the East and its inhabitants. In the history of Orientalism, an important cultural circumstance is the "habit of deploying large

generalizations” such as race and language, and underneath “these categories” is the “rigidly binomial position of ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’” (227). Westerners have used the characteristics of the East to define themselves; whatever they are, we are *not* and the other way around, disregarding any similarities there might be.

Fear of Islamic culture is a vital part of Orientalism. The East can be categorized into the Near Orient and the Far Orient (Said 58). A defining factor for the Near Orient is its religion: Islam. Said argues that Islam has been regarded with fear by Europe since the Islamic conquests during the Middle Ages. As a result, Europe associates Islam with “terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians” (59). The Orient also confronts Westerners with perceived threats such as “sex, unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty and boundless distance” (167). However, it is precisely because the West also associates the East with “sexual promise, untiring sensuality and unlimited desire” that the West, at the same time, is drawn to the Orient (188). The East, then, is both threatening and intriguing to the West.

According to Said, Orientalism means that Middle-Eastern citizens, especially Arabs, are represented through stereotypes. Writing in the late 1970s, Said argues that the depiction of Arabs has shifted “from a faintly outlined stereotype as a camel-riding nomad to an accepted caricature as the embodiment of incompetence and easy defeat” (285). The Western depiction of Arabs and the Arab world has always been negative and stereotypical. According to Said, the West distinguished between two kinds of Arabs. “There are good Arabs (the ones who do as they are told) and bad Arabs (who do not, and are therefore terrorists)” (206). While the “good” Arabs enable Western colonialism, those who oppose colonialism are labeled “bad” and even terrorists. Moreover, Arab society is characterized as male-dominated and

passive, in contrast to the democratic West (311), reinforcing the opposition between “us” vs. “them.”

The edition of *Orientalism* used in this thesis was published in 2003, and contains a new preface written by Said. In the post-9/11 political climate and after the U.S invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the interest in *Orientalism* revived, and the book was re-published. In the preface, written only months before his death, Said reflects upon his own work. He is disappointed that, in the U.S., the Middle East, the Arabs, and Islam have been even more subject to “demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché” since 9/11 (xiii). He explicitly blames the media and self-appointed specialists in Islamic culture for the wars waged against the Islamic world, because they all “re-cycle the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations so as to stir up ‘America’ against the foreign evil” (xv). He formulates his desire to use *Orientalism* as “humanistic critique” to evoke more “understanding and intellectual exchange” among scholars instead of “polemical, thought-stopping fury” that focuses on a collective identity (xvii).

Orientalism had a tremendous influence in the field of post-colonial studies. According to Bob Lebling, the book “demonstrates with persuasive documentation that the historical development of Orientalism has been anything but an innocent and objective quest for knowledge about the Arabs and their world” (Lebling 118). *Orientalism*, according to Ali Behdad, is “a pioneering text” that has opened up the field for other scholars who develop Said’s theory and analyze its implications (Behdad 709). Said’s theory altered the way scholars examined the relations between the East and the West, steering them away from the binary thinking that characterized previous scholars’ work, though, as I will show, not all critics agree with this last point.

Many other scholars praise *Orientalism* as well. According to Talal Asad, *Orientalism* “reminds us that the hegemony of Orientalism is still so massive that it is not feasible to try to develop alternative approaches without first confronting it with a view to undermining, not its rational achievements, but its traditional authority” (Asad 649). In Asad’s opinion, *Orientalism*’s goal is to critically examine the authority of the West in representing the East. As Robert Nichols puts it, Orientalism is a “complex process of dominating the representation of non-Western peoples through the production of specific forms of knowledge about the non-West” (119). The West took it upon itself to represent the non-West measured against Western values, leading to “distorted the images and forms of knowledge about [the non-West]” which “justified the ongoing physical-military colonization of [...] lands and resources” in the non-West (Nichols 119). Traditionally Western scholars claimed the authority to discuss the East, yet Said’s theory questions this authority and the portrayal of the East in the West.

Although these scholarly comments attest to *Orientalism*’s influence, Said’s theory has its flaws as well. Throughout *Orientalism* Said continually defines and redefines the term, which leads to confusion. According to the American anthropologist James Clifford *Orientalism* is “polemical,” and “its analysis corrosive” (206), precisely because of the inconsistent definition of Orientalism. According to Clifford, Said “qualifies and designates [Orientalism] from a variety of distinct and not always compatible standpoints” (208). Said himself clarifies his definitions of Orientalism halfway through the book:

Orientalism is not only a positive doctrine about the Orient that exists at any one time in the West; it is also an influential academic tradition [...], as well as

an area of concern defined by travelers, commercial enterprises, governments, military expeditions, readers of novels, and accounts of exotic adventure, natural historians, and pilgrims to whom the Orient is a specific kind of knowledge about specific places, people, and civilizations. (Said 203)

Said includes all these aspect in his definition of Orientalism, which can be confusing. However, I would argue that the fact that Orientalism is not a static term and has no fixed definition does not entirely invalidate its meaning.

In his book, Said relies on Foucault for examining Orientalism as a discourse. *The Edward Said Reader* states that the discourse on the Orient “composed a discipline by which European culture managed and produced the ‘Orient’” (Bayoumi 64). According to Clifford, “Said's humanist perspectives do not harmonize with his use of methods derived from Foucault” (212). Said borrows from Foucault the notion of discourse, attempting to “extend Foucault's conception of a discourse into the area of cultural constructions of the exotic” (Clifford 213). Other scholars, such Robert Nichols, also identify this problem. He asks “how discourse [can] be said to both ‘create’ its object of study and, at the same time, be a ‘misrepresentation’ or ‘distortion’ of the original object” (Nichols 127). According to Said, Orientalism constructed Orientalist ideas about the East, yet this representation is false, which complicates the notion of Orientalism as a discourse.

Whether or not Said’s use of Foucault is accurate, the most glaring problem with *Orientalism* is its tendency to divide the world into two separate categories, thus falling back on the very binary thinking it criticizes. Moreover, in a 1992 book-length examination of Said’s writings, Bruce Robbins points out that Said “can be charged with keeping the unrepresented from representing themselves, substituting [the

West's] own elite intellectual work for the voices of the oppressed even as [the West] claim[s] to represent those voices" (50). This indicates Said might be guilty of the same practice of which he accuses Orientalists: claiming to have the authority to represent and speak for the "Other."

The critique that Said is culpable of binary thinking is shared by the Pakistani-British Islam scholar Ibn Warraq, who in his book *Defending The West* (2007) takes a radically different view on Orientalism. Warraq's central argument is the opposite of Said's: the West is superior to the East, and its negative depiction of the East and Islam is therefore justified. He accuses Said of teaching "an entire generation of Arabs the art of self-pity," with a book that has an "aggressive tone" (Warraq 18). Said may take the "moral high ground," but in fact his book is nothing but "intellectual terrorism", because scholars who disagree with Said have "insult heaped upon" them (Warraq 18). Warraq argues that Said falsely depicts the Orient as "a victim of Western imperialism, dominance and aggression," for the Orient is able to control its own destiny (Warraq 28). Warraq points out that not only Western scholars, but also Arab, Iranian, and Asian intellectuals have refuted Said's book. Warraq does not merely oppose the content of the book; he also blames Said personally for his views.

In her review of Warraq's book, Silvia Croydon writes that she initially questioned whether Warraq's book adds anything to the already existing criticism on *Orientalism*. However, it is exactly Warraq's hostile approach that sets him apart from other critics (Croydon 430). Her conclusion is that Warraq succeeds in arguing that the West is not to blame for its attitude towards the East. Warraq shows that Said's presumption of the West being "racist, xenophobic and self-conceited" is invalid, for in fact the West possesses the opposite characteristics: "i.e., rationalism,

universalism and self-criticism” (430). Said attributes characteristics to the West in the same way Orientalist attribute characteristics to the East, which in Croyden’s view undermines the legitimacy of Said’s theory.

Despite the criticism of Said’s work, since 9/11 there has been a revival of Orientalism, as the Middle-Eastern and Muslim background of the terrorists rekindled lingering Orientalist stereotypes. In a 2012 article, Malreddy Pavan Kumar points out that over the past two decades, several forms of Orientalism have emerged, among which “Parallel Orientalism,” which makes the distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims, and “Counter-Orientalism,” an anti-Orientalist movement (Kumar 235-236). Maryam Khalid similarly argues that, just as “Western constructs of Easterners as ‘other’ have been used to justify conquest and colonialism,” after 9/11 a new version of Orientalism emerged to legitimize America’s War on Terror (Khalid 15). After the attacks, hostility towards and incomprehension of the East increased, and the East was held responsible for the terrorist attacks, which justified the War on Terror. Khalid argues that the U.S. envisioned itself as the leader of the “civilized world,” taking upon itself the responsibility to liberate the Middle-East of its oppressors (20). Gender plays an important part in the justification of the War on Terror as well, as Judith Butler explains:

The sudden feminist conversion on the part of the Bush administration, which retroactively transformed the liberation of women into a rationale for its military actions against Afghanistan, is a sign of the extent to which feminism, as a trope, is deployed in the service of restoring the presumption of First World impermeability. (Butler, *Precarious Life* 41)

The focus shifted from the War on Terror to the Taliban's War against Women in Afghanistan. Women and children in Afghanistan were living in extremely harsh conditions and had to be rescued. The fact that many women in Islamic countries are veiled was seen as a sign of male oppression, from whom women need to be saved. This veil has become the symbol of the "Other." Butler concludes that the creation of the female, veiled "Other" that needs to be liberated from the male, cruel "Other" allowed the U.S. to present itself as a "morally and physically superior" nation, which then legitimized the U.S. government to use military intervention (27-28).

This ideological strategy was first launched in a report titled "The Taliban's War Against Women," issued by the U.S. State Department on November 17, 2001. In this report the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor outlined the cruelties the Taliban committed against women living under their regime. On that same day, First Lady Laura Bush used her husband's weekly radio address "to urge worldwide condemnation of the treatment of women in Afghanistan, and to ensure that they have rights and can contribute when that country is rebuilt" (Stout). Mrs. Bush argued that the "brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorist" (Stout). Not only did they oppress women in their own countries, the Taliban were also planning to implement gender oppression worldwide. Mrs. Bush's radio address was the start of an international campaign that focused on the domination and oppression of women under the Taliban regime and by extension in all Islamic countries.

After 9/11, the most recognizable image of Muslims that emerged in Western media, apart from veiled women or women in burqas, was that of male, bearded and extremist terrorists. Commenting upon this stereotypical image of Muslim men, Inderpal Grewal points out that the conservative news media only portrayed the so-

called “bad” Muslim post-9/11. The media showed Islamic-looking males, giving them the characteristics of “fanatical, well-trained, dangerous and thus barbaric” Muslims (Grewal 545-46). This is what created our image of terrorists. The media’s creation of this “Other” enabled Americans to create their own identity as solidary with the victims and fundamentally different from the terrorists. Muslims are labeled as “bad,” because this is the stereotype the conservative media feed their audiences. Even though President Bush, stated immediately after the attacks, on September 20, 2001, that “the enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends” but “a radical network of terrorists,” his speeches are filled with imagery of the dangerous “Other” (Bush). Bush explains in the same speech that in Muslim countries controlled by al Qaeda “women are not allowed to attend school” and “a man can be jailed [...] if his beard is not long enough,” thus implicitly making a connection between terrorists and bearded Muslims (Bush).

Researching the framework used by media in their coverage of Muslims, specifically of the Shia-Sunni tensions, Aziz Douai and Sharon Lauricella argue there is a “deep-seated Orientalist treatment of Islam as ‘Other.’” After 9/11, they argue a “Neo-Orientalist discourse” emerged, setting news in a “terrorist frame” (21). This “terrorist frame” has become the “master narrative”, and intensified post-9/11 Orientalism (21). This Neo-Orientalist discourse is present in the political rhetoric of the Bush administration and its justification for the War on Terror. This discourse, characterized by the negative and stereotypical depiction of Muslims, did not merely occur in the media, but emerged in post-9/11 fiction as well. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, fiction writers and filmmakers had to decide in what way they would deal with the Muslim “Other.” Two of the works discussed in this thesis, the movie *United 93* and the novel *Falling Man*, try to counter Orientalism, yet fail to do so

successfully, whereas the other two works, the movie *Rendition* and the novel *The Blind Man's Garden*, are able to oppose prevailing Orientalist stereotypes more effectively.

Chapter 2

The Representation of the Muslim “Other” in *United 93* and *Rendition*

The attacks of 9/11 were “like a movie”; this notion was expressed by numerous people in response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. The events of that horrendous day were broadcast worldwide and reminded viewers all over the world of a scene in a Hollywood thriller. However, as Christina Rickli writes, the problem with this response was that, of course, it was *not* a movie. Previously, movies about America under attack had always positioned “good versus evil in a fictitious, predetermined setting where the American side wins.” In most cases “the American under attack rises up and eventually defeats the perpetrator” (Rickli, par. 9). Because the actual attacks of 9/11 lacked the element of U.S. victory, they “confronted the American public with a defective and thus unsettling reference to prototypical scenes of an important Hollywood genre” (Rickli, par. 10). The movie-like events were shocking, but the absence of a happy ending caused an even bigger shock.

Due to the gravity of the attacks, Hollywood filmmakers were faced with the question when to start making films about them and how to approach the subject. It was uncertain how viewers would respond to movies about 9/11. Moreover, the industry wondered on what aspect of the attacks the movies should focus. It took several years before movies on 9/11 were produced, with a few exceptions, such as Spike Lee’s *25th Hour* (2002), which only dealt indirectly with the attacks, and Alain Brigand’s *11.09.01* (2002), consisting of eleven shorts, which did not have a wide audience. Expectedly, several of the first few movies about 9/11 took an American

perspective. So does *United 93*, the movie I will discuss first. Directed by the British director Paul Greengrass, *United 93* focuses on the predicament of the American passengers and portrays the Muslim terrorists as dangerous “Others.” Released a year later and largely set in the Middle-East, Hood’s movie *Rendition* was one of the first to take a more international and nuanced approach, taking a critical position towards the role of U.S. foreign policy in the War on Terror.

Greengrass’s *United 93* is a docu-drama, based on the historical event of the hijacking of one of the four planes on September 11, 2001. It was one of the first movies Hollywood made that explicitly dealt with the attacks. United Airlines 93 was on its way to San Francisco when it was taken over by four terrorists. This is the only hijacked plane that did not hit its initial target, which presumably was the Capitol in Washington, DC. The movie plot largely alternates between the events on board of the plane and the situation in the flight control room of the Federal Aviation Administration. Even though *United 93* is about the devastating attacks, it emphasizes the courage and heroism of the passengers and crew aboard the plane.

United 93 is an example of American heroism that shows America will survive, a positive message that might help the American audience to deal with the trauma caused by the attacks. Richard Corliss calls the movie a “feel good movie” with an “inspiring ending” (Corliss). Despite the horrific nature of the attacks and the many deaths it caused, the idea that the heroic passengers prevented the plane from hitting its target gave Americans the chance to feel that not everything was lost, thus restoring some sense of control. In the *Observer*, reviewer Philip French calls the movie “a fitting memorial to the courage of these men and women who decided they were not going to be passive victims and ended up saving hundreds of lives and

averting the destruction of a national shrine” (French), a message that emphasizes that American citizens can choose to act against terrorism. Laura Frost points out that most representations of 9/11 in film and fiction share an “emphasis on narratives of redemption, bravery, noble sacrifice, dignified human connection and, above all, heroism” (17), taking as example *United 93*. By focusing on the heroism and bravery of the passengers and flight crew and re-telling the story of the crash that killed all aboard the plane as a heroic tale, *United 93* reinforces American exceptionalism. The heroic attempt of the, predominantly American, passengers to resist the evil terrorists reinforces the idea that Americans are extraordinary. Even if the terrorists win in the short term, Americans can and will fight back.

United 93 seeks to tell the story as it actually happened on board of the plane and in the flight control room, and thus blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. In his review in *Time*, Corliss explains that the director pushed the realism to the point where many actors are amateurs who play themselves or play roles that are connected to their own profession. The actor playing the pilot is an actual pilot, the national operations manager of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is playing himself, and one of the terrorist-actors was a soldier in the Iraqi army (Corliss). Moreover, the actors playing the terrorists did not have any contact with the passenger-actors until the scenes on board of the plane were shot, and these scenes of the hijacking and passenger revolt were partly improvised (Corliss). Greengrass did everything in his power to make the movie seem as realistic as possible, which clouds the difference between historical facts and script.

By presenting the story as realistically as possible and emphasizing the heroism of the passengers, the movie has a trauma-healing function. The movie’s use of “real-time narrative aesthetics to represent historical events” (Cameron 365) is

enhanced by the use of shaky camera movements and the jumping back and forth between different characters and settings. The use of film techniques, such as the hand-held camera during the hijacking of the plane, add to the blurring of what really happened and what was staged for the film, a phenomenon Anneke Smelik calls the “real virtuality of the spectacle” (Smelik 309). Smelik argues that the transition from the real events to the film makes the trauma caused by 9/11 a “performance of memory” which is necessary in order to comprehend the situation (Smelik 310); because these images of the attacks are now “performed” they are less traumatic for the viewers (Smelik 312), enabling them to deal with their trauma.

However, the docu-drama’s tracing of the events as they occurred, minute by minute, makes it impossible for the movie to move beyond the event itself and to address the wider global context. According to Slavoj Žižek, the realistic element of the film engages the viewer, but also means that the film is “restrained from taking a political stance and depicting the wider context of the events” (Žižek). Žižek’s critique that the movie lacks an important political and global engagement resembles Gray and Rothberg’s critique of 9/11 fiction. Moreover, because most viewers witnessed 9/11 through television images, the subsequent creation of films showing those same images blurs the boundaries between reality and virtuality. The thin line between the actual events and the scripted movie may well cause viewers to incorporate the fictional images from the movie into their memory as if they were real, which causes the viewer to accept the depiction of the terrorists in the movie as accurate.

The film’s treatment of the terrorists is actually ambiguous. The film contains elements that could be categorized as Orientalist. The viewer is introduced to the terrorists at the very beginning of the movie, even before the movie takes the viewer

to the airport. *United 93* begins with scenes of Oriental men praying, and talking in Arabic, and it looks as if they are preparing for a trip, with Oriental chanting in the background. These images alternate with images of New York. The men go to the airport, where a seemingly normal day begins. Planes are leaving, passengers are checking in, and the viewer is presented with the routine situations in the flight control room. French argues that “the function of the opening is to isolate the hijackers from their victims, but we are told nothing of their backgrounds” (French). Significantly, their prayers and conversations are not subtitled. It makes sense that they speak in Arabic, for the terrorists were Arab, but the non-Arab speaking viewer is left in the dark as to what they are saying. Their religious rituals are not explained and the only recognizable piece of information is the much-repeated phrase “Allahu Akbar.” The terrorists all come across as religious fanatics, for they all continually pray and call upon Allah, a practice that is associated with fanaticism, and therefore reinforces the stereotypical link between Islam and terrorism.

This alienation of the terrorists continues throughout the movie. Once the plane is airborne and the terrorists discuss among themselves when they should start, some of their lines are subtitled, yet the subtitling remains restricted to those parts of the script that are essential for the viewer’s comprehension of the plot (56:20). Their prayers and yelling at the passengers are not subtitled (1:27:05). According to Ford, this sets the hijackers in an “alien realm” (45). The terrorists’ motives are religious, but their “belief is without meaningful content, without application in the world inhabited by the rest of the passengers” (Ford 45). Thus the movie falls back on Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims being alien and strange.

However, the strategic alienation of the terrorists and their (for non-Arabic speakers) incomprehensible language at some points conflicts with the movie’s

obvious attempt to sketch a more complex portrait of the terrorist. The movie features four terrorists, who differ in their attitudes, and thus are individualized to some extent. The first thing that stands out is the tenseness and hesitation of the terrorists. The terrorist who eventually flies the plane and appears to be in charge is the most hesitant. On board of the plane, he gives the impression that he might want to back out. When one of his fellow terrorists comes to his seat and asks, “why are we waiting” (in Arabic) (56:16), he answers “it is not the right time” (56:21). This suggests the possibility that he has a conscience and doubts their mission, a trait that on the one hand humanizes him, but also suggests weakness. The doubts of the pilot-terrorist make the viewer wonder where his hesitance and the tension among the hijackers comes from. In the film, the main function of his hesitance seems to be that they do not have the situation under control, thus giving the passengers a chance to overpower the hijackers. There is no evidence of hesitation or conflict among the hijackers during the historical event. The director’s choice to depict the terrorist leader as indecisive has the effect of highlighting the heroism and determination of the passengers.

Another example in the movie that contributes to the pilot-terrorist’s humanity takes place just before boarding. He makes a phone call, to presumably his wife or girlfriend, which is subtitled: “I love you” (10:48). Even if it had not been translated, some Western viewers might have understood it for he speaks German at that point, saying “Ich liebe dich.” This is a subtle moment where the “Other” is granted human and vulnerable traits, yet this moment is very brief and is not explained further, causing the viewer to forget it almost instantly.

Despite these scenes in which terrorist characters are portrayed as human, the focus of the movie remains on the heroic American passengers aboard flight 93. Just

as the Muslim protagonist Ahmad in John Updike's *Terrorist* "remains an outsider" (Gray 136), so do the terrorists in *United 93*. Even though the viewer observes how the terrorists struggle with their mission, their personal motives are left obscure; as Gray says of Ahmad in Updike's novel, "you never get under the skin" of these characters (Gray 136). Neither do we find out what their political motives are or what the international context of the attacks is.

Even though the backgrounds of the white passengers aboard of the plane are not developed individually or specifically, there is still a distinction between the way the movie treats them and the terrorists. The hijacking unfolding aboard the plane is consistently shown to the viewer from the perspective of the passengers or from an external perspective. The focalization shifts from external focalization, for example in the scenes showing the terrorists' hesitation, to the perspective of the passengers and crew, while the terrorists' perspective is absent, which causes the viewer to identify with the passengers. The passengers and crew form one group, but the film focuses on a few key passengers and crew members, who take charge during their counterattack. These passengers and flight attendants gather in the back of the plane to collect possible weapons to use during the counter attack (1:26:44). Moreover, the viewer sees how passengers aboard the plane are making emotional phone calls to their family, while the personal circumstances of the terrorists are ignored almost completely. As I pointed out earlier, the pilot-terrorist does make a personal phone call before boarding the plane, yet his is less elaborate and dramatic than those of the passengers.

The ending of the movie is significant as the last scene merges reality with fiction. As the attacks unfold, the movie works towards the anticipated climax of the plane's crash. However, at the very moment this climax is about to take place, the

screen goes black. Elisabeth Ford argues that it goes black “to avoid being taken for a melodrama by explicitly denying us the genre’s traditional climax” (Ford 47). She argues that:

When the film ruptures its fictional frame to recall us to our post-9/11 consciousness, referring to the final shot of the black screen, its melodramatic urges find their expression outside the narrative frame, in the perspective we bring as characters in the original drama now being represented before us. (Ford 47)

The line between reality and fiction again proves remarkably thin. The viewer has been consumed by the story for two hours, and the effect of the ending is that the viewer relates the ending to the reality in which he or she features as well, for the film abruptly stops and the viewer realizes these passengers are dead in the real world as well.

Even though the terrorists show visible hesitation and the movie attempts to humanize them, the terrorists are separated from the passengers, or, in other words, “we” are separated from “them.” The movie suggests that there are hardly any similarities between “them” and “us.” The terrorists, the only Muslims shown in the film, might be capable of love and human doubt, yet their language, habits and religion are fundamentally different, which leads to a negative and threatening image of the “Other.” Moreover, Ford points out that the hijackers narrative is “static” (44), in contrast to that of the passengers. Precisely because the movie claims to neutrally and realistically show what happened that day, the movie suggests that it is indeed telling the truth. As a result, the viewers are likely also to believe the Orientalist

image of the terrorists, and possibly by extension all Muslims, as strange and incomprehensible “Others” that is ultimately conveyed in the movie.

The movie *Rendition*, which came out in 2007, only a year after *United 93*, tries to put the consequences of 9/11 in a different perspective. Instead of focusing on American heroism, it sheds light on the ideological and political aftermath of 9/11. The War on Terror, declared by President George W. Bush, and the curtailment of civil liberties by the Patriot Act are criticized in the movie. The setting of the movie alternates between two countries, the U.S. and an un-identified North-African or Arab country, indicating that this movie includes an international perspective on the attacks of 9/11. Moreover, two storylines run simultaneously in the movie; one focuses on the capture of the American Muslim protagonist Anwar El-Ibrahimi by the CIA, the other follows Fawal, head of the secret police in the un-identified country, and his family, incorporating the perspective of international citizens and exploring the consequences the attacks had on them. One plotline begins with CIA agent Freeman and the bombing which leads to El-Ibrahimi’s kidnapping. The second plotline shows two Arab teenagers falling in love, of whom one is Fawal’s daughter Fatima. She is in love with a boy who turns out to be the suicide bomber that carried out the terrorist attack. The second story line, centered around Fawal’s family, ends where the first one begins, but this is only revealed at the end of the movie.

The kidnapping of the Muslim protagonist Anwar El-Ibrahimi drives the plot. The CIA seizes him when he is on his way home from a business trip to South Africa. He is accused of knowing more about a terrorist attack that occurred in an unspecified North African country a few days earlier, based on the evidence of a phone call, connected to the bombings, that was made to his phone. El-Ibrahimi is

held captive abroad and tortured for information, under the law of extraordinary rendition,¹ while his pregnant American wife, Isabelle El-Ibrahimi, desperately tries to locate him. She is convinced of his innocence and pulls all the strings she can to save him. Once she realizes something is wrong, she asks Alan Smith, an old friend who works for a U.S. senator, for help. However, in the end it is American CIA agent Douglas Freeman who saves El-Ibrahimi.

The most striking difference between *Rendition* and *United 93* is its critical position towards the United States. The movie suggests that U.S. foreign policy played a part in the radicalization of Islam and that its practices of extraordinary rendition and torture are discriminatory and abusive. In *Rendition*, the hawks in the American government are represented by Corrine Whitman. Suspicious of everything related to the East or Islam, Whitman symbolically resides in her own “white house.” Dressed in white and situated in an almost sterile environment, she states that “The United States does not torture” (1:03:59), even though the viewer at that point has already witnessed a torture scene overseen by a CIA agent.

When the senator’s aide Alan Smith confronts Whitman with El-Ibrahimi’s disappearance, she asks him what exactly is bothering him: “The disappearance of a particular man or national security policy?” She concedes that “this [the hunt for and torture of terrorists] is nasty business” (1:08:15), but justifies this by claiming that “there are over 7,000 people alive tonight in central London because of information we elicited just this way” (1:08:16). Smith, however, is highly critical of this invasion of the civil liberties of American citizens, and he sarcastically proposes to send a copy of the U.S. Constitution to her office to remind her that what the CIA is doing is

¹ After September 11, 2001, the CIA launched a program of “extraordinary rendition” to handle terrorism suspects. The CIA wanted to detain and interrogate foreign suspects without bringing them to the United States or charging them with any crimes. Their solution was to secretly move a suspect to another country (Fisher).

wrong and unconstitutional. In response she promises to send him a copy of the 9/11 Commission Report, implying that the policy of extraordinary rendition is morally justified (1:08:40). Whitman justifies the potential sacrifice of one man's life for the lives of thousands of others.

The torture scenes and Whitman's character put the U.S. government and the CIA in a critical perspective. The viewer is made to strongly suspect that El-Ibrahimi is innocent, for he keeps denying all the accusations made against him and the viewer has seen that he was not present or involved with the suicide bombing, yet Whitman refuses to acknowledge this possibility. The movie is particularly critical of torture as a means to extract information. *Rendition* is perhaps the first 9/11 movie that shows explicit torture scenes. Describing *Rendition* as a movie "that puts a face to the practice [of torture]," Robert Ebert argues that the film shows "that we [Americans] have lost faith in due process and the rule of law, and have forfeited the moral high ground" (Ebert). The movie suggests that the U.S. government will do anything to track down possible terrorists and justifies the sacrifice of one man by claiming that it possibly saves thousands of lives.

The torture scenes take place in a dark and frightening environment, with no sounds in the background except for the rattling of chains and noises of beating up the prisoner. Fawal, head of the secret police, carries out the torture, in collaboration with the CIA, explaining to Freeman that their "work is important" and that they "save lives" (46:36). In the first torture scene, El-Ibrahimi is screaming and begging, hanging naked from the ceiling, covered in blood, while the Fawal and his colleagues stand calmly in their suits asking questions (1:19:50), both shot in close-ups. This chilling setting and the explicit images of torture emphasize how cruel and inhumane

the practices are. These scenes indicate that even though the torture does not take place in the U.S., it is still the U.S. that is responsible.

Moreover, the film suggests that the U.S. is complicit in radicalizing Islamic youth in Arab countries, as becomes clear in the second story line. Initially, Fawal is portrayed critically as a traditional Muslim, who tortures fellow Muslims and dominates the women in his family. Gradually, however, the viewer begins to see Fawal as a father, who is trying to protect his family. At the end of the film, the viewer discovers that Fawal has lost his daughter in the suicide bombing, before the interrogation of El-Ibrahimi begins, but this information is deliberately withheld at this point in the movie. It is the suicide bombing of which he was the target that Fawal wants to solve. Fatima, Fawal's daughter, ran away from home with her boyfriend, Khalid. At the end, it is revealed that it is Khalid who carried out the suicide attack, in an attempt to kill Fawal. Fawal, as collaborator, is responsible for the death of Khalid's brother. This loss causes him to radicalize and join a terrorist organization. This plot twist shows that radicalization, torture, and terrorism are not simply a result of Islamic religion. Fawal is torturing El-Ibrahimi in a desperate attempt to find his daughter and Khalid is avenging his brother; both are acting out of love.

In contrast with what Gray argues about 9/11 literature, Guy Westwell argues that the 9/11 attacks triggered "an increased willingness to explore difference" (815) in movies. Although Westwell's comment is not applicable to all 9/11 films, it is specifically relevant to *Rendition*, as this movie makes an effort to look beyond the national borders of the U.S. The bombing scene at the end of film shows Khalid and Fatima standing at the square, where Fatima begs him not to kill her father and Khalid hesitates (1:44:10). Khalid is humanized and his character developed, as the

viewer knows his motives for cooperating in the terrorist attack, and his hesitation is visible. He is not a murder machine, nor is Fatima or Fawal for that matter. The movie depicts these Muslim characters as relatively complex individuals, enabling the viewer to sympathize with them. As Gary Kern puts it, *Rendition* “emphasizes personalities, drama and emotion, yet the research is thorough and the presentation of locales is detailed and convincing” (871).

Rendition does not try to manipulate the viewer in thinking all Muslims are honorable and good-hearted, but stresses their humanity. The movie also complicates the stereotype of oppressed Muslim women. Fawal may be a traditional, authoritarian Muslim, but his sister is an unmarried and emancipated woman who wears no headscarf, and his daughter runs away from home to be with her lover. Even though Fawal’s wife wears a headscarf, she is not simply an oppressed wife either. She defends her daughter in front of him, asking Fawal to “call her... for me,” because things “are not the same as when we were young” (20:10), suggesting that she realizes the world has changed, and thus going against the Orientalist stereotype of a static Muslim world.

However, despite all the anti-Orientalist features, the movie has an American hero, whose highly symbolic name is Freeman. When Freeman meets Fawal for the first time, he hands over the questions the CIA would like him to ask El-Ibrahimi. Fawal allows Freeman to observe; yet he is not allowed to interfere in the interrogation (37:35). Throughout the interrogation that follows Freeman indeed stays out of it. However, he seems uncomfortable with the circumstances, indicating that he disagrees with torturing a man without any concrete evidence of his guilt. During the next torture scene, Freeman speaks up, saying “it is not working” (58:10) and asking for a moment with El-Ibrahimi. During the ten minutes that are granted to

him, Freeman too resorts to violence. When El-Ibrahimi still does not admit to having ties with terrorists, Freeman's belief in his innocence is strengthened. It is not until El-Ibrahimi gives a false confession that Freeman's suspicions are confirmed entirely.

Freeman is the only officer who is not satisfied with El-Ibrahimi's confession and keeps digging, indicating his sense of justice and independent mind. He questions how often "truly legitimate intelligence" (1:31:14) is obtained through torture, arguing that people who are tortured will eventually say anything to make it stop. Moreover, Freeman acknowledges that if "you torture one person, you create ten, a hundred, a thousand new enemies" (1:31:38). Freeman then risks his job to release El-Ibrahimi and send him back to the U.S. Freeman represents the "good" American, with a conscience and the will to uncover the truth. In the end, the movie conveys the message that torture and extraordinary rendition cannot be justified the way Whitman does, for it does not save lives, but only creates more enemies.

Liza Powell reads in *Rendition* an attempt to "challenge the binary oppositions that pervaded post-9/11 political rhetoric" (165). Yet, in Powell's opinion, *Rendition* might take it a step too far by insinuating that the U.S. government is corrupt and knows no mercy in its hunt for terrorists; in trying to overcome Orientalist stereotyping, the film falls into the trap of reproducing binary thinking, vilifying the West instead of the East. However, the movie does not simply vilify the West. Even though *Rendition* features a white, Western male hero who is ultimately responsible for El-Ibrahimi's rescue, the movie encourages Americans to be as independent of mind and non-discriminatory towards the "Other" as Freeman is, using him as a role model.

The fact that *Rendition* features an Arab-American protagonists, a marriage between an Arab Muslim man and a white Christian woman, and explicit torture scenes indicates that it makes an effort not to take a pro-American approach to the events of 9/11. The viewer is confronted with violence, aggression, and terrorism as consequences of the 9/11 attacks, yet these violent acts are not directed at Americans but, ironically, at innocent Muslims, indicating that inhabitants of Muslim countries are ultimately victims of 9/11 as well. The Muslim characters vary in their behavior and beliefs, which counters stereotypical, Orientalist depictions. Fawal's character gradually develops throughout the movie and has some depth, and Khalid, the suicide bomber, radicalizes precisely because of the U.S.-supported torture practices. The movie, to some extent, explores the motives and background stories of so-called "Other." The movie is critical of the U.S. government, suggesting that American leaders and security officials are just as fanatic as Islamic extremists and will show no mercy. The movie ultimately complicates Orientalist stereotypes by featuring individual, in some cases well-rounded, Muslim characters and adopting a critical perspective on U.S. foreign policy.

Film is a powerful medium. According to Steven Ross, movies "teach us how to think about race, gender, class, ethnicity, and politics" (1). He argues that in "shaping our vision of the promises and problems of American life, movies matter the most about the things which we know the least" (2). Since movies can have such a cultural influence, popular movies might be able to shape the ideas and opinions of their audience. *United 93* feeds the audience an image of the "Other" as alien, and simultaneously dangerous and weak, suggesting through its quasi-documentary film techniques that its depiction of the terrorists is accurate. *Rendition* tries to give a

more balanced view, showing that only a few Muslims are terrorists and that the U.S. government is partly responsible for the radicalization of Islam. The movie also criticizes the U.S. policies, such as the Patriot Act, showing how they curtail civil liberties and infringe on the privacy of American citizens, increasing the power of the government.

Online reviews of *United 93* were generally positive. It scored 8.2/10 on Rotten Tomatoes and got 7.6/10 on IMDB, which are both popular online movie-rating platforms. *Rendition*, on the other hand, was less well-received. It received a score of 6.8/10 on IMDB and 5.5/10 on Rotten Tomatoes. Remarkably, the budget for *Rendition* was higher than that of *United 93*, yet the latter made more money. *Rendition* had a budget of \$27,500,000, while *United 93* had \$18,000,000, while in the end the box office results of *United 93* were \$77 million in total, and *Rendition's* only \$26,9 million (The Numbers). *United 93* was significantly more popular than *Rendition*. As Catherine Zimmer points out, “it is highly notable that while films addressing contemporary politics, such as *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007), and *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford, 2007), lost money, the *Saw* series has proved consistently marketable” (Zimmer 86).² According to Jeff Birkenstein, films such as *Rendition* that are critical of U.S. politics are less successful than other movies, perhaps because “such dramas hit too close to the truth to be enjoyed as entertainment” (Birkenstein 70).

It is difficult to find empirical evidence for viewers' preference of *United 93* over *Rendition*, yet it is likely that most viewers do not appreciate *Rendition's* critical attitude towards the U.S. or that viewers prefer tales of American heroism. Ross points out that the “overriding preoccupation of US filmmakers has been with the war

² Zimmer indicates that movies with a focus on political issues, in this case *Rendition*, are in general less popular than movies that do not criticize the U.S. and are merely meant for entertainment. The *Saw* series are commercial horror movies.

as an *American* experience,” and “very few filmmakers have situated themselves among Iraqis to observe occupation and its consequences” (347). Ross specifically focuses on movies dealing with the war in Iraq, yet his comment seems applicable to other 9/11 movies as well. Many of the movies are not especially critical towards the position of the U.S., which might be connected to the preference of the audience for movies about American heroism.

According to Klaus Dodds there are both lovers and haters of *Rendition*. He argues that

Some praise [*Rendition*] for raising troubling issues such as the use of rendition and torture. Others such as *The Guardian*'s (London) film critic were critical of its refusal either to contemplate whether acts of torture such as water boarding ever saved lives (Dodds 239).

This is an issue the movie itself addresses as well, as Whitman is convinced the U.S. policy is saving lives, while Freeman indicates it only creates a more negative view of the U.S.

Some reviewers “dismissed the film as ‘liberal propaganda’” (Dodds 240). However, Dodds quotes indicate that at least some viewers of *Rendition* were made to think critically about the U.S. policy of extraordinary rendition and its consequences. As Dodds points out,

[*Rendition*] generated a fairly detailed analysis of how rendition has involved trading liberties and constitutional procedures against security, which has been used to justify incarcerations without trial and abusive interrogation – and

which led the United States to develop relationships with dubious governments in the Middle East.

Dodds concludes that, despite a “low box office take,” the IMDB comments prove that *Rendition* still is “capable of generating a series of interventions (some of them ill-tempered) over the US War on Terror and the role of murder, torture, and abuse by both American personnel and ‘Islamic terrorists’” (240). He points out that a movie does not need to be highly popular and a box office success to trigger a response from the viewers. This is a valid statement, yet when a movie does not attract a large audience, the responses and views of the audience are not considered media worthy and only a small part of American society is willing to engage in the important discussion regarding post-9/11 policies.

In conclusion, *United 93* portrays the terrorists as more dangerous and unpredictable than the passengers, which confirms the idea of a revival of Orientalism post-9/11, while in *Rendition* the diverse Muslim characters are portrayed empathetically as human individuals. *United 93* claims to be highly realistic in its narration of the events that took place aboard the plane. It focuses on the cruelty of the attacks and, especially, on the heroism of the American citizens who were faced with the challenge to overpower the armed terrorists. However, by convincing the viewers this it is the true story, it suggests that its portrayal of the terrorists is true as well, although there is no way of verifying this claim. The terrorists’ background and motives are kept in the dark, which tends towards an Orientalist portrayal of the “Other” who is completely different and threatening. The movie reproduces American exceptionalism as it presents the passengers as heroes fighting for their freedom against the dangerous “Other.”

In *Rendition*, however, the Muslim characters are portrayed as individuals and not all as religious fanatics. The movie invites the viewer to look at the possibility that the U.S. might be complicit in the creation of terrorists, and that Muslims in other countries are also victims of the consequences of the 9/11 attacks. The idea that 9/11 only traumatized and affected American citizens is undermined, for the movie mainly focuses on the suffering of Muslims. Moreover, traditional Orientalist thinking is contested in this movie, indicating one cannot rigidly categorize people based on their descent. Despite *Rendition*'s anti-Orientalist message, *United 93* is preferred by Western viewers, indicating that Western audiences are either willing to accept the Orientalist views of the "Other" as portrayed in *United 93* and feel comfortable sympathizing with the American victims, or prefers to see their Orientalist prejudices and nationalist ideology confirmed.

Chapter 3

The Representation of the Muslim “Other” in *Falling Man* and *The Blind Man’s Garden*

As Michael Frank and Eva Gruber point out, “the field of literary studies is still strongly marked by the impact of 9/11, an event that was immediately identified as constituting not only a historical and political, but also a cultural watershed” (Frank 1). Literature can fulfill various cultural roles in dealing with historical events that have a worldwide impact. In the post-9/11 context some literary works were created out of the need to address the collective trauma the attacks had putatively caused. In the introduction to *Literature and 9/11* (2008), Ann Keniston argues that it is important to “examine the ways that literature has participated in the larger cultural process of representing and interpreting the events of September 11, 2001, while also revealing the difficulties of doing so when cataclysmic events are still so recent” (Keniston 2). She acknowledges that literature can play a role in dealing with the trauma caused by the attacks, yet emphasizes that this is a complicated process, which suggests some novels are more successful in doing so than others.

According to Keniston, “early works often attempted directly to capture and convey the events of 9/11 and emotional responses to the events; as time has passed, the approach to the attacks has become more nuanced” (Keniston 3). This development is exemplified by the two novels that will be discussed in this chapter. The two novels deal with the attacks in very different ways: whereas Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) emphasizes American characters’ emotional response to the attacks, affirming to some extent Orientalist stereotypes, Nadeem Aslam’s novel *The*

Blind Man's Garden (2013) attempts to widen the scope and incorporate a more nuanced international perspective to the attacks, countering Orientalist discourse.

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* is set in New York in the period immediately after the attacks. Michael Frank categorizes the novel as part of the "New-York-set novels about the attack and their emotional aftermath" (Frank 2). As I pointed out in the introduction, the novel's chapters move between three focalizers: Keith, Lianne, and the terrorist Hammad. It starts with Keith Neudecker, the protagonist, a lawyer, who is stumbling away from the site of the attacks. He was present in the building when the planes hit and among those who were able to escape. In his confused and shocked state he goes "home," to his wife Lianne, one of the other two main characters in novel, from whom he had been separated for a while. The attacks and the emotional consequences drive Keith back to Lianne and their son Justin.

However, shortly after the attacks, while still living with his family, Keith has an affair with a fellow survivor, whose briefcase he inadvertently had been carrying during the escape from the tower. Keith has lost several friends with whom he used to play poker, and after a while increasingly avoids being home by playing in professional poker tournaments. Lianne and Keith's marriage does not survive the chaotic reunion, the affair, and his obsessive participation in poker tournaments. His affair and poker obsession can be interpreted as consequences of his trauma. He seems to be more comfortable around the woman he has an affair with than with Lianne, because she shares his experience of the attacks.

The aesthetic strategy of the novel resembles Keith's symptoms of trauma; both are characterized by numbness, flashbacks, and confusion. Caruth defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive

occurrence of hallucinations, flashbacks and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 24).

Keith’s response to the attacks on the World Trade Centre echoes this definition.

When he comes home and Lianne starts to ask questions, he answers:

It’s hard to reconstruct. I don’t know how my mind was working. A guy came along in a van, a plumber I think, and he drove me here. His radio had been stolen and he knew from the sirens that something was going on but he didn’t know what. At some point he had a clear view downtown but all he could see was one tower. [...] One tower made no sense. Then he turned uptown because that’s where he was going and finally he saw me and picked me up. But this time the second tower was gone. Eight radios in three years, he said. All stolen. An electrician, I think. He had a water bottle he kept pushing in my face. (25)

The fragmented, chaotic writing style of this passage reflects Keith’s traumatized state of mind. This passage, focalized through Keith, represents Keith’s thought process as an unstoppable chain of associations, jumping from one idea to the other without having any clear logic or significance. The sentences, sometimes short, sometimes long, are incomplete and fragmented, and the use of punctuations is illogical. In his attempt to answer Lianne, his thoughts race back to what happened, unable to stop.

Noting the novel’s unconventional and non-linear structure, Keniston calls the novel a “temporally and spatially disrupted novel” (Keniston 5). According to Keniston, “the novel’s temporal shifts allow DeLillo to represent the effects of the attacks on the characters, but they also dramatize how the survivors remember and

integrate the experience into their lives” (Keniston 5). The attacks are incomprehensible and therefore traumatic, and the writing style aims to reflect this. It is non-chronological and syntactically fragmented, filled with flashbacks and incomplete sentences. The confusing structure and fragmented sentences, reflecting the symptoms of trauma, enable the reader to grasp the nature and impact of the trauma 9/11-survivors had to deal with. The novel’s aesthetic strategies represent the trauma of American victims specifically.

According to Gray, the novel is not able to move beyond the symptoms of trauma, partly because of its writing style, and thus does not give the reader the opportunity to engage with the wider consequences of the attacks. Gray argues that the novel “simply assimilates the unfamiliar into familiar structures” (Gray 134). The incomprehensible attacks are portrayed from the perspective of Americans who are directly or indirectly affected and focus on their personal trauma. Gray argues that the novel “is too clearly foregrounded, the style excessively mannered, and the characters fall into postures of survival after 9/11 that are too familiar to invite much more than a gesture of recognition from the reader (Gray 132). The staccato and fragmented writing style addresses the trauma inflicted on American citizens, and fails to put the attacks in a wider political context. Like Rothberg, Roy Scranton argues that “to do serious cultural work today” we should expect 9/11 fiction to devote “some effort [...] to understanding the complex global systems of capital and communication that shape our world” (Scranton 140).

Rachel Greenwald Smith, on the other hand, argues that “the novels that represent and articulate the attacks as world-changing while remaining formally familiar do indeed reflect the post-9/11 nexus of trauma, politics, and aesthetics with remarkable accuracy” (Smith 155). This indicates that a novel that focuses on

Americans traumatized by the attacks can still have value in a post-9/11 environment. Smith argues that the problem authors faced, that is writing post-9/11 fiction that “encourages new ways of thinking, feeling, and creating,” is connected to the political environment in the U.S. post-9/11, which was characterized by “a profound instrumentalization of the event at the service of political and economic goals that were more ideologically continuous than disruptive” (Smith 155). Gray desired post-9/11 fiction to be different from fiction written before 9/11 because 9/11, in his view, changed the world. Therefore, *Falling Man*, in his opinion, failed because it did not change the literary landscape. However, Smith argues that 9/11 did *not* radically alter the world, politically or culturally, and therefore there is no inherent reason for a new literary style.

Even though *Falling Man* focuses on trauma, the novel does incorporate the perspective of one of the terrorists, Hammad. Hammad is one of the three focalizers in the novel, yet he is set apart from the other characters. The novel is divided into three parts. All three parts end with a short section on and focalized by Hammad. The three parts are all titled with a name: Bill Lawton, Ernst Hechinger and David Janiak. Each of these names is misleading. Bill Lawton is a misnomer for Bin Laden, created by Keith and Lianne’s young son Justin and his friends. Ernst Hechinger is the actual name of Martin Ridnour, who is in a relationship with Lianne’s mother. David Janiak is the actual name of the street artist who goes by the name of Falling Man. All of Hammad’s parts are unnumbered and titled with a place name: “On Marienstrasse” (97), “In Nokomis” (217) and the last “In the Hudson Corridor” (303). These place names correspond with places in Germany, Florida, and New York, the places the terrorists actually visited in preparation for the attacks. The other parts, with focalization shifting between Keith and Lianne, are numbered. When the story shifts

back to Keith or Lianne, the numbering continues without having counted the sections focalized through Hammad, distinguishing him from Keith and Lianne.

The writing style of Hammad's sections does not significantly differ from those focalized through Keith or Lianne. Hammad's passages are equally fragmented and constitute rambling thoughts as well. In the first Hammad section, "On Marienstrasse," a street in Hamburg, Germany, where a group of Muslim extremists apparently is preparing the attacks, Hammad notes: "Everything here was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds" (99). He states that "Islam is the struggle against the enemy, near enemy and far, Jews first, for all things unjust and hateful, and then the Americans" (100). Both sequences are written in the same staccato and fragmented style, with Hammad's mind making incoherent associations.

Hammad does not plainly adhere to the stereotypical image of a Muslim extremist. He gradually gets more involved with a group of radical Muslims, but initially he is resistant to their indoctrination. He has a girlfriend, with whom he has a sexual relationship: "sometimes he wanted to marry her and have babies" (104). He is also conflicted about growing a beard, as he was told to do: "He spent time at the mirror looking at his beard, knowing he was not supposed to trim it" (104), even though he knows it "would look better if he trimmed it. But there were rules now and he was determined to follow them" (105). In the second section about Hammad, the group has moved to the U.S. and is taking flight training, after first attending a training camp in Afghanistan. Hammad "wore a bomb vest and knew he was a man now, finally, ready to close the distance to God" (219). However, Hammad still does not seem absolutely certain, as he wonders if "a man [has] to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find a way" (223).

Hammad is not portrayed as a particularly devout Muslim, yet in the end he does follow Amir's orders. Amir, the leader, disapproves of Hammad's behavior and doubts concerning their mission. Upon reflection Hammad concludes "he had to struggle against himself, first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives" (105), indicating he is sensitive to Amir's opinion. Hammad still struggles, especially concerning "the lives of the others he takes with him" (223). When he confronts Amir with this question, the answer he gets from Amir is that "the others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them," a comment that "impresses" Hammad (224). In the end it is suggested that Hammad is an insecure man who wants to live a "normal" life, yet is indoctrinated by radical Muslims, who make him believe that he has to fulfill his destiny and fight the West.

When the novel reaches the point when the attacks take place, Hammad is still hesitant. On board of the hijacked plane, Hammad tries to assure himself that "this is [his] long wish, to die with [his] brothers"; his "breath came in short bursts" and his eyes "were burning" (304). Hammad's fear almost becomes tangible in those moments before the plane touches the tower. The doubts he had all along are still present, yet he attempts to calm himself by thinking about paradise, assuring himself that "every sin in [his] life is forgiven in the seconds to come" (305). Whether the group's motives for the attack were indeed solely religious is ambiguous. On the one hand they "were becoming total brothers" (105), on the other hand they "are finding the way already chosen for us" (223), indicating their fate is in Allah's hands. DeLillo's attempt to take the perspective of the terrorist is admirable, yet whether Hammad acts out of his belief in brotherhood or his Islamic faith, Muslims are still portrayed as dangerous. Either their belief in Allah or their strong sense of brotherhood and community will cause them to desire the downfall of the West.

As the plane hits the tower, Hammad's perspective collides gradually into Keith's. In the last scene, Hammad becomes Keith in just a sentence. One moment, Hammad fastens his seatbelt; the next Keith is blasted out of his office chair. This can be connected to DeLillo's metaphor of organic shrapnel. Early on in the novel, when Keith receives medical treatment in the hospital, the doctor explains the phenomenon: "the survivors [of suicide bombings] ... develop bumps [...] and it turns out this is caused by small fragments [...] of the suicide bombers body" (18). The doctor does not think that Keith is hit by organic shrapnel (19), yet the collision of the two bodies suggests that a piece of Hammad's body is symbolically blasted into Keith's body. Keith may not psychically suffer from a bump literally caused by a piece of Hammad's body, but, as Smith points out, organic shrapnel maybe read as a metaphor for trauma, as "we tend to think traumatic events of this magnitude [...] dramatically alter the very physical constitution of the survivors" (153). The presence of symbolic organic shrapnel of Hammad in Keith suggests that many 9/11 survivors may carry around such shrapnel inside of them, which symbolizes that many Americans feel as if they have drastically changed due to the attacks.

Hammad is not the only character that gives the novel an international dimension; so does Martin Ridnour, the lover of Lianne's mother, whose real, German name is Ernst Hechinger. Martin used to be a radical activist in Europe, as Lianne's mother explains to Lianne: "he was a member of a collective in the late nineteen sixties. Kommune One. Demonstrating against the German state, the fascist state" (184). According to Lianne's mother, Martin used to be a German terrorist, who was part of a network that carried out attacks in Germany. Udo Hebel argues that with Martin's character, DeLillo "engages the transnational memory of terrorist activities in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, which had

links to the training camps in the Middle East, to ideological cadres in the German Democratic Republic and other countries of the Eastern block” (Hedel 179). Martin himself compares the jihadists to the radicals of the sixties and seventies (*Falling Man* 185), indirectly suggesting that as a former radical he has something in common with the jihadist. Lianne’s mother argues that if Martin had ever killed someone, he would not be walking around today, yet it never becomes clear of what deeds Martin is guilty.

DeLillo attempts to broaden the perspective of 9/11-literature by explicitly including the narrative of one of the terrorists, and thus avoid Orientalist stereotyping. He tries to humanize and complicate Hammad’s character by portraying him as a man who is capable of love and occasionally has a critical mind. However, Hammad is easily persuaded by Amir to adopt the terrorists’ mission. His narrative stands apart completely from the main storyline and is less elaborate. The reader does not get any concrete information about why Hammad in the end decides to go along with the attacks. Perhaps he desires to die with his (Muslim) brothers, or perhaps he believes Amir and he desires to reach paradise. Either way his terrorist actions are connected to his Islamic background. DeLillo’s attempt to represent the terrorist’s perspective in itself is praiseworthy, yet the focus of the novel continues to be on Keith and Lianne and their trauma. Martin, the former German terrorist, is on the one hand introduced to show that terrorism is not exclusively Islamic; on the other hand he is able to walk around freely and is treated like a normal person, suggesting that he is different from Muslim terrorists. Smith makes a valid argument that 9/11 literature is not obliged to be radically different, and *Falling Man* does incorporate an international perspective to some extent, contrary to what Gray claims. However,

even though the novel does not actively propagate Orientalist discourse, it fails to criticize it.

DeLillo's novel, written mostly from an American perspective and focusing on the personal trauma of American citizens, stands in sharp contrast to Pakistani writer Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*, which is set in Pakistan. Even though the latter novel does not directly deal with the attacks, it shows some of the consequences the U.S. military response to the attacks had for people living in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Moreover, the novel places 9/11 in the historical context of U.S. neo-colonialism, dramatizing the impact of U.S. foreign policy on ordinary citizens in countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, and on the internal conflicts in these countries concerning government corruption and religious radicalization. The novel features a variety of Muslim characters, emphasizing their humanity and vulnerability, contrary to Bush's "us vs. them" rhetoric that emphasized their "otherness" or even demonized them. In an interview Aslam has said that this "clash between an incomplete understanding of the East and an incomplete understanding of the West" that occurred in the decade after 9/11 inspired him to write this book (Hong). *The Blind Man's Garden* shows that not only American citizens have been affected negatively by the attacks and are the victims of a personal or collective trauma, but that citizens in Islamic countries experience the devastating consequences as well, and are in many ways much more vulnerable than Westerners.

The characters' stories make clear that the consequences of the 9/11 attacks go beyond the borders of the United States. Pakistani citizens are affected too, and, like many families in the U.S., have lost loved ones as a result of the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror that followed. The novel places the trauma of 9/11 in an

international perspective, as the protagonists and settings are not American. Judith Butler points out that “those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated, and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed” (xviii). Instead of focusing on traumatized Americans who narrate their traumas to their fellow Americans within the U.S., Aslam’s novel puts 9/11 in an international context, narrating the trauma of Muslim victims of both neo-colonial politics and Islamic radicalism. This draws the reader’s attention to the international consequences of 9/11 and the conflicts within Islamic countries related to the rise of religious extremism. Aslam’s novel humanizes the “Others,” giving them a face and thus enabling the reader to recognize their suffering and losses as well.

The main characters in this novel are Mikal, Naheed, Jeo, and Rohan, all Pakistani citizens, who live in post-9/11 Pakistan. Jeo and Mikal are foster brothers. Although Jeo and Mikal are both in love with her, Naheed marries Jeo, who is more suitable as a husband according to her mother, due to his profession as a prospective doctor. Jeo and Mikal leave for Afghanistan, as volunteers to help people who have been injured in the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan. They are ambushed and Jeo is killed, while Mikal is captured by warlords and subsequently sold to the Americans, who offer money for captured terrorists. Both sides torture him, and he struggles to make his way back to Naheed, with the intention of marrying her. When Jeo’s body returns home, Naheed is left a widow and longs for Mikal to return, as she is convinced he did not die. Besides the narrative of Naheed’s and Mikal’s love, there is the story of Rohan, Jeo’s father, a pious Muslim, who, due to the loss of his wife and now his son, struggles with grief and guilt.

The Blind Man's Garden does not simply portray Muslims as the religious fanatics and dangerous terrorists that the conservative media showed American viewers after 9/11, despite the presence of characters who belong to this category. On the one hand, the novel reinforces the binary opposition between “good” and “bad” Muslims. Like *Rendition*, *The Blind Man's Garden* tries to complicate the existing stereotypes by showing a variety of well-rounded Muslim characters. Extremist and repressive Muslim characters, such as Major Kyra, are contrasted with sympathetic characters, such as Naheed and Mikal. In his review of the novel, Peter Faber notes that “Aslam’s characters — whatever their background or motives, and even as they advance ‘into the crosshairs of history’ — are never emblematic of anything but themselves” (Faber), indicating that the characters are individualized and well-rounded. The novel seeks to undermine the stereotypical picture of Muslims in the media that was raised after 9/11 as male, bearded, extremist terrorists with Mikal, the protagonist of the novel, who is a non-threatening male Muslim character. Aslam uses Mikal, whose journey back home to Heer from captivity in Afghanistan, takes up a significant part of the novel, to counter existing Orientalist views of the “Other.”

Although Mikal’s suffering is partly caused by American soldiers sent to Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, he never blames the Americans. In the course of Mikal’s captivities by the Afghani warlords and the Americans, and his struggle to reach Heer, he becomes more and more paranoid. During captivity by the Americans, Mikal is convinced that his fellow prisoner “has been placed in the next cage to make Mikal reveal information” (162). When Mikal is about to be set free, he is certain that “the Americans are about to execute him” (192), which causes him to kill an American soldier during his release. Despite all these challenges, Mikal does not regard the Americans as the enemy, stating that even though they may have killed

others, “that’s not how it works” and “they didn’t kill me” (203). At the end of the novel he suggests that “the white man’s eyes are a doorway to another world, to a mind shaped by different rules, a different way of life” (333), indicating he is able to recognize the value of other cultures and does not perceive them as a threat to his own identity.

Rohan, the other important male character, is an “interestingly problematic figure whose religious convictions, though sympathetically portrayed, at one time caused him to withhold medication from his dying wife,” as James Lasdun puts it in his review. Aslam explains in an interview that he separates his characters from their religion, for he believes that “a person has many layers to his personality” (Hong). He points out that “just because [one is] religious doesn’t mean all [one’s] acts are in accordance with [one’s] religion” (Hong). This becomes evident in Rohan’s character. Rohan is a devout, peaceful follower of Islam. His wife Sofia, on the other hand, was an artist and even though she married Rohan as a devout Muslim, she was unable to preserve her faith, valuing the real, natural world more than her belief in Allah. Because she rejected the faith, it is later disclosed, Rohan withheld her medication when she fell ill, in order to force her to embrace Islam again. He attempted to save her soul, wishing for her to reach heaven instead of being doomed to hell, but in effect kills her.

After Sofia died, Rohan burned all the works of art she created, “fearing she would be judged for disobeying Allah” (19). Her art, consisting of images of the natural world, could, according to Islam, lead to idolatry, and is therefore forbidden. At the time, Rohan carried out his actions without hesitation, yet after “two decades of thought he does sometimes suspect that his conduct had resembled sin” (39). Lasdun writes that Rohan’s “existence is a kind of atonement” (Lasdun, par. 9),

indicating Rohan has been trying to make up for his mistakes. Contemplating on his life, Rohan in the end concludes his blindness is a punishment for his actions. “He didn’t want to see what [Sofia] had painted, now he won’t be able to see the real things” (113). Though Rohan is a devout Muslim, he is shown to be struggling with some aspects of his faith. Rohan, just like Mikal, might be a Muslim, yet he is not portrayed as extremist or dangerous.

Major Kyra, a hateful and violent man, who has connections with radical Islamism, initially confirms the Orientalist view of Muslims. He resents the U.S. for invading his country and believes that 9/11 is “a conspiracy” that was “staged to invent an excuse to begin invading Muslim lands one by one” (27). Moreover, he considers the teachers at Ardent Spirit, the school founded and formerly run by Rohan and Sofia, are “Muslim but traitors to Islam, filling the heads of children with un-Islamic things like music and biology and English literature” (152). Major Kyra obtained the school through his jihadist brother, Ahmed, a former student of the school, who took over the school from Rohan and turned it into a strictly Islamic school. When Ahmed died in Afghanistan, he left the school to his brother. Under Ahmed, the school “developed links with Pakistani’s intelligence agency, the ISI” (27), for which Kyra formerly worked. Ahmed’s death meant the dissolution of that connection, meaning “the Ardent Spirit pupils now belong to [Major Kyra] alone and through them he’ll set his plans in motion, moulding them to be warrior saints, brilliant in deceit against the West” (28).

Under Major Kyra’s leadership, a group of radicalized Arden Spirit students plan a terrorist attack on the Christian St. Joseph school in Heer, in retaliation against America’s foreign policy and interference in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The plan is to “raid the school and hold everyone hostage” (151) in order to force the Americans

to leave Afghanistan and free “all our brothers who are being held prisoner by them” (151). Their aim is to remove all Western influence and military presence from Afghanistan, and they are willing to resort to extreme violence to reach this goal; Kyra even proposes, “we must purchase a camcorder – to film the beheadings” (190). After the siege has begun, the terrorists release a list of demands:

We are followers of Allah’s mission and let it be known that that mission is spreading the truth, not killing people. Peace not war. We ourselves are victims of murder, massacre and incarceration. The West’s invasion of Afghanistan – the only true Islamic country in the world – is an unprecedented global crime, and our brothers and sisters and children are being killed as we write this, abducted and taken way to be tortured. (255)

By staging this attack in Pakistan, Aslam points out that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as part of its foreign policy only fuels the radicalization of the area, sparking violence against moderate forces within Islam. Butler argues as well that “in pursuing a wayward military solution, the United States perpetrates and displays its own violence, offering a breeding ground for new waves of young Muslims to join terrorist organizations” (*Precarious Life* 17).

The siege of the school bears similarities with the reality of the situation in the East after 9/11. In 2004, militants attacked a school in Beslan, Russia, for fifty-two hours, killing 334 people, among whom 186 children (Balmforth). In December 2014, a similar siege was carried out in Peshawar, Pakistan, where a group of seven terrorists attacked a school wearing bomb vests, killing 141 people, of whom 132 were children (Boone). Especially Kyra’s suggestion to record the beheadings

reminds the reader of the actual situation in the Middle East and the violent beheadings recorded by IS, which occurred shortly after publication of the novel. These correlations between the events in the book and the terrorist attacks on schools in real life prove how compelling and topical the events in *The Blind Man's Garden* are.

Butler points out that the acts of violence carried out by the U.S. “do not receive graphic coverage in the press, and so they remain acts that are justified in the name of self-defense, but by a noble cause, namely the rooting out of terrorism” (*Precarious Life* 6). She connects this with the U.S. government’s use of female oppression in Islamic countries as a justification for the War on Terror, an issue that is addressed in *The Blind Man's Garden* as well. In Aslam’s novel, however, the stereotype of Muslim women’s oppression is complicated. Naheed, the main female character in *The Blind Man's Garden*, is a strong woman. She does not fit into the traditional picture of an oppressed Muslim woman. First of all, Naheed chooses to remain a widow initially, even though her mother insists that she has to remarry. Her mother warns her that life as an unmarried widow in Afghanistan is not safe, yet Naheed refuses to marry merely for the sake of safety, which would be giving in to the dominant culture of oppression.

Secondly, Naheed aborts her husband’s child. When she discovers she is pregnant with Jeo’s child, her mother arranges for medication to abort the child, going so far as to lock Naheed up in a room in an attempt to force her to take the medicine. Naheed initially refuses to do so, insisting that she “will bring him up [herself]” (92). Her mother accepts her decision after a few days, letting her out of the room, but Naheed miscarries anyway, admitting to her mother, “It wasn’t Allah. I did it myself” (102). She appears to be afraid of the consequences of being an unmarried

widow with a child after all. When towards the end of the novel she becomes pregnant with Mikal's child, however, Naheed gives birth to it even though she will have to raise it herself. Both her choice to have a sexual relationship out of wedlock with Mikal, and her decision to have the baby are courageous, even if these choices were made out of love. Despite the fact that she hides her "sin" by pretending it is her sister-in-law Yasmine's child, because "there is no alternative" (366), Naheed shows strength and independence.

The Blind Man's Garden represents post-9/11 Pakistan as a dangerous place, especially for an attractive young widow such as Naheed. Sharif Sharif, the landlord, has his eye on Naheed and wants to make her his second wife. Naheed stubbornly refuses Sharif Sharif's proposal, though her mother anxiously reminds her of the vulnerability of single women and widows in Pakistan. She arranges another boy for Naheed to marry, because "it's the only way" (187). After some time Naheed accepts Sharif Sharif's offer, as she realizes she has no other choice and "[she] didn't know what to do" (277). However, before a wedding can take place, Mikal returns from Afghanistan, fleeing from the Americans who seek him for the murder of an American soldier. Naheed is represented as a sensitive woman, who behaves as independently as she can. Aslam acknowledges the harsh circumstances she lives in, yet does not reduce all the problems she is faced with to Islam, but also shows that her precarious situation is connected to U.S. foreign policy and international warfare.

As Yaqin and Morey point out, Muslim women are primarily stereotyped by means of their clothing habits. In the West, female Muslims are stereotyped as women "whose individuality has been obliterated by the burqa" (Yaqin 205). Many Westerners assume a link between women wearing headscarves and burqas and the oppression of women in Muslim culture, a notion that is reinforced by the media.

Nevertheless, *The Blind Man's Garden* complicates this link. When Sofia, Rohan's deceased wife, was a young university student, the other students excluded her and made fun of her because she wore a burqa. Her father advised her to "take off [her] burqa" because "modesty and decency dwell in the mind, not in a burqa." Her father's liberal approach contrasts sharply with that of Sofia's mother, who feels that without her burqa "the chances of [Sofia] making a decent marriage were in complete ruins" (176). This remark complicates the common notion that wearing the burqa is a sign of male oppression, indicating that gender restrictions are not necessarily imposed (only) by men. It is a woman who coerces Sofia to wear a burqa, just as it is Naheed's mother who "commends the women of Kabul for being wise enough to stay in their burqas" (101), even after Afghanistan is "liberated" by the Americans. In the case of the two mothers, adherence to dress codes may be sensible: women know what happens to other women when they do not obey. As Naheed's mother puts it, "there are no second chances or forgiveness if you are a woman and have made a mistake or have been misunderstood" (101). Yet, although in Islamic countries women have less authority and independence than men, the novel insists that women are not simply passive victims: while some women are complicit in the system, for example, the group of local women who invent the tradition that women are not allowed into graveyards (83), other women like Naheed resist oppression.

In the last part of the novel, the reader discovers that the brother of the American soldier Mikal killed is looking for him, seeking revenge for his brother. He and Mikal, who is fleeing from the Americans, meet by accident, without knowing who the other is or how they are connected. Mikal captures the soldier, but does not kill him. Mikal and the soldier do not speak each other's language, yet they seem to develop a connection during the time Mikal holds the soldier captive. Towards the

end of the novel, when the soldier starts to sing to himself, Mikal is touched and responds very emotionally, as “the unafraid resonance connecting the two of them across the heat-thinned air” (341). Mikal begins to cry and has the uncontrollable urge to tell the soldier about his life. He “reaches out a hand and places it on the [soldier’s] shoulder” and tells him about Naheed, Jeo, and his incarceration, even though “his mouth [is] full of failed words” (342). Mikal ends with apologizing to the soldier for killing his countrymen (342).

Butler points out that all humans are vulnerable, and that “there are others out there on whom [one’s] life depends” (*Precarious life* xii). She argues that “to be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, [...] to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways” (*Precarious life* xii). Mikal and the American soldier are in a vulnerable condition and their lives depend on each other. Butler argues that because Americans suffered from loss and violence, they have the chance to empathize with others who suffer from the same loss and violence. Mikal and the soldier share a bond, regardless of their incapability to speak each other’s language. This indicates that there is a possibility for healing trauma and reconciling the two cultures.

The Blind Man’s Garden engages in a wider debate about how Muslims and citizens of Islamic countries are directly or indirectly victims of 9/11 and its aftermath as well, by including their perspective, instead of focusing on the domestic consequences within the U.S. The novel’s key passage, according to Aslam, occurs when Mikal finds his way back to Heer and Naheed tells him: “It’s been four hundred and seventy-nine days since I saw you last. I feel like I have been in four hundred and seventy-nine wars” (274). In an interview, Aslam explains that even though it is the men who “engage with history head-on” during a war, the women who stay behind

are affected as well (Wren). This indicates again that the consequences of war affect more people than solely the soldiers or the direct victims. Similarly, the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror that followed did not just disturb the lives of American citizens or soldiers; innocent citizens of Islamic countries were affected as well, fighting a war each day.

In conclusion, in *The Blind Man's Garden* the stereotypical image that Westerners have of Islam is complicated. On the one hand, the novel features such diverse characters, with complex personalities, that the stereotypical connection between Islam and terrorists is refuted. On the other hand, the novel does not deny that there are extremists who use Islam to justify violence and oppress and abuse women. However, most importantly, the novel emphasizes that the wars and struggles in Afghanistan and the Middle East are not simply due to Islamic religion, but that U.S. foreign policy helps shape and even fuel these conflicts. The novel rejects U.S. exceptionalism and Western stereotypes. The presence of humane and psychologically complex Muslims such as Rohan and Mikal's reconciliation with the American soldier refute the Orientalist presumptions that all Muslims are dangerous and extremist.

In contrast to *Falling Man*, *The Blind Man's Garden* shows awareness of the debate regarding the "Other" that followed the 9/11 attacks, causing the readers to critically think about their own attitudes and consider the international perspectives as well, which might encourage a more open-minded view of the "Other"; a view that challenges Orientalist discourse. *Falling Man*, with its focus on American citizens, does not actively engage the reader in this debate. Hammad's character does give the perspective of the terrorists, yet his motives remain obscure. As Greenwald argues, a post-9/11 novel is not obliged to address the geopolitical circumstances; even if it

focuses on trauma, it can still be an effective response to the attacks. However, novels can and perhaps should be criticized if they reinforce stereotypical images of Muslim men and women and thus support binary “us versus them” divisions. *Falling Man*'s incorporation of Hammad, with his doubts and to an extent independent mind counters Orientalist discourse, yet does not succeed in refuting it, whereas *The Blind Man's Garden* does.

Conclusion

Racism, discrimination against and stereotyping of Muslims are virulent in our Western, post-9/11 world. Especially with the conflicts in the Middle East in the news every day and realistic terrorist threats, many people in virtually all parts of the world express feelings of anger, anxiety and racism towards Muslims and a considerable number of Westerners see jihad, terrorism and violence as inherent in Islam. Said's theory of Orientalism is therefore more relevant than ever. The perceived divisions between the East and the West seem to have only widened since 9/11 due to the rise of anti-Islam political parties in Europe and more recently IS-inspired violence, which only gives ammunition to those parties.

The debate concerning Orientalism is not a matter of who is right or wrong: it aims to enhance awareness about discriminatory practices and stereotyping in the West and the East. Some scholars, such as Warraq, have contested Said's theory and the most important issue remains Said's reproduction of binary thinking. Said accuses Western scholars of being prejudiced and having misconceptions about the East, and particularly Muslims. However, by categorizing the world into the West and East as well, and claiming that all Western scholars and Westerners general are Orientalists, Said to some extent stereotypes Westerners himself.

Nevertheless, the prejudiced attitudes of many Westerners towards Muslims cannot be denied. Circumstances in Arab countries are volatile, yet to simply regard Islam as the malefactor is to ignore other contributing factors, such as U.S. foreign policy. The 9/11 attacks increased anxiety about Islamic religion and culture and suspicion of pious Muslims. Movies and novels produced in response to the attacks were faced with the question of how to deal with these Muslim "Others." My analysis

of the movies *United 93* and *Rendition*, and the novels *Falling Man* and *The Blind Man's Garden*, indicates that there are similarities in the approach of *United 93* and *Falling Man* on the one hand, and *Rendition* and *The Blind Man's Garden* on the other. Butler argues that “in the United States, [they] begin the story by invoking a first-person narrative point of view” (*Precarious Life* 5), and even though these stories have to be told, in order to “understand ourselves as global actors, [...] we will need to emerge from the narrative perspective of U.S. unilateralism and [...] to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others” (*Precarious Life* 7). *United 93* and *Falling Man* stick to the first-person narrative by taking an American perspective, and do not challenge the to empathize with the “Other” in any significant way, whereas *Rendition* and *The Blind Man's Garden* do.

The former film and novel predominantly take an American perspective, and focus on the experiences and traumas of American citizens involved in the attacks. Neither work explores the characters of the terrorists in depth. To be sure they do not demonize them either, and may play a cultural role in helping American readers to work through the trauma caused by 9/11, yet they fail to avoid Orientalist discourse. *Rendition* and *The Blind Man's Garden* on the other hand place the attacks in an international context, both featuring characters that deconstruct stereotypical, Orientalist representations of Muslims. Moreover, both works criticize U.S. foreign policy, showing that the U.S. is not the only victim of the 9/11 attacks, and criticizing the U.S. for contributing to the international geopolitical crises that followed 9/11.

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