

Masculine and Feminine Subjectivity in the Wake of Catastrophic 9/11 Events in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Abstract

Gender stereotypes were developed within American culture through the establishment of specific social norms for individuals of different sexes. The concept of masculinity has historically been linked to qualities such as independence, aggressiveness, power, and self-reliance. Conversely, the feminine gender was historically linked to characteristics such as reliance, delicacy, and submissiveness. Don DeLillo's novel, *Falling Man* (2007), offers a critical examination of the efficacy of the traditional male archetype, in properly addressing the profound effects of terrorism on American identity. This critique is exemplified through the portrayal of Keith Neudecker's personal strive, as he undergoes a traumatic experience due to the events of September 11, 2001. The deterioration of Keith exemplifies the inherent instability of the mythical gender construct, while his eventual destiny as an average poker player serves as evidence of the ineffectiveness of this concept of masculinity. This study examines the key theoretical perspectives of Judith Butler's gender and performativity, R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, and Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of gender roles, to investigate both masculine and feminine reactions to the devastating terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in the novel.

Keywords: trauma, masculinity, feminine, gender, 9/11 attacks

Introduction

Falling Man explores how we react to dread when attempting to make sense of a world that is practically collapsing around us, with Keith Neudecker's story and the first section of the novel as two excellent examples of this. To highlight the sense of uncertainty and disorientation, the narrative starts out in the third person and uses short, jumbled sentences. The novel's post-apocalyptic setting, storytelling, and writing serve as a means of communication between the diverse characters who populate what at first glance appears to be a choral novel but actually inhabit wildly dissimilar existential worlds that DeLillo describes in the book as:

The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air. The noise lay everywhere they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time . . . He kept on walking . . . and things kept falling.¹

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¹ Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 4.

On September 9, 2001, the entire globe was stopped in its tracks by a terrible shock. When the towers were destroyed, it was a national apocalypse. It was a bizarre, unheard-of, and unexpected occurrence. The dawn of the day, which was full of promises and convergences, destroyed millions of people's sense of living and put their mental health in danger. In its wake, the entire city of New York was in turmoil. There had been thousands of deaths, and there were still thousands to mourn. The risk to live in this world was seen by not just America but by the entire world. The victims as well as those who observed the incident are the main subjects of DeLillo's attention. The horrifying spectacle of the attacks is described as:

It was not a street anymore, but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near nigh . . . They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars. The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumbles of the fall. This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, bustling around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall.²

The attacks had a profound impact on the American populace, leading to a significant decline in their previously elevated sense of pride associated with consumerism and the capitalist economic system. DeLillo's work primarily challenges conventional perceptions of masculinity, particularly those that associate men with assertive and aggressive reactions to acts of terrorism. *Falling Man* symbolizes the predicament faced by the protagonist, Keith Neudecker, who is one of the survivors of the 9/11 attacks. The novel explores his subjective experience, which continues to be deeply affected by trauma in the aftermath of the event in American society. He falls in a state of vulnerability, progressively succumbing to the weight of the horror he experienced during his escape from the north tower of the World Trade Center.

Masculine Subjectivity

The term "sex" pertains to the biological distinctions between individuals, whereas "gender" refers to the societal constructs and roles associated with being male or female. When the concept of sex transitions into the notion of gender, it subsequently influences the process of socialization pertaining to individual's assigned sex within a given society. The socialization of sex refers to the process by which cultural norms are specifically transmitted and internalized. These two terms can be used interchangeably at the same time. The renowned American scholar, Judith Butler states in *Gender Trouble* that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results."³ Thus, sex is a biological construct that pertains to the physiological and anatomical characteristics that distinguish individuals as male or female. On the other hand, gender encompasses the societal and cultural expectations, roles, and behaviours that are assigned and expected to be performed by individuals based on their sex.

² DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 4.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 34.

The concept of “hegemonic masculinity”⁴ propounded by the Australian sociologist R. W. Connell aims to provide an explanation for the mechanisms by which men uphold their dominating societal positions over women and other gender identities that are considered “feminine” within a particular social context. The characteristics associated with dominant masculinity differ depending on the specific context. The ability to effectively manage one's own business or street gang can be perceived as indicators of masculinity within distinct cultural frameworks. Keith Neudecker is a man approaching the age of forty, with a remarkable physical appearance characterized by his handsomeness, strength, and exceptional physical fitness. Additionally, he exhibits a determined and accomplished demeanour in his professional pursuits as a real estate Attorney inside the global economic hub, thus epitomizing the archetype of a masculine individual. Keith's sexual conduct displays dominance and assertiveness, as illustrated by his wife, Lianne's eager expectation for him to physically push her against a wall prior to her completion of dressing. During the initial stages of their romantic involvement, Lianne found great pleasure in Keith's embodiment of masculinity, characterized by a potent manifestation of sexual vitality. Butler asserts “gender identity is simply a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”⁵

Both men and women have internalized the societal stereotype that associates masculinity with sexual aggression and dominance over the female body. Berthold Schoene-Harwood in *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man* (2000), discusses the acceptance of violence as an integral component of masculinity that is deeply ingrained in the majority of men's perception and compels them to “maintain an attitude of self-contained mastery, if necessary by means of violence.”⁶ However, approximately a year and a half before the September 11th terrorist attacks, Lianne made the decision to terminate their relationship abruptly, citing her fear of Keith's capacity for cruelty as the primary motivation for her actions. Even before marriage, her mother, Nina cautioned her of the destructive masculinity that Keith possesses, “The closer a woman gets, the clearer it becomes to him that she is not one of his male friends. And the more awful it becomes for her. This is Keith. This is the man you're going to marry.”⁷ Before the attacks Keith's aggressive behaviour has been described as “ready to break up a table and burn it so he could take out his dick and piss on the flames.”⁸ Keith's violent masculinity is explained by Mary J. Parish as:

DeLillo's characterization of the pre-9/11 Keith shows the dark side of the *man's man*, and in particular the need for control and refusal of connection that reflect the internalization of the femiphobic anxieties implicit within the myth. Rather than glamorizing Keith's stereotypic expression of masculinity in the fashion of Peggy

⁴ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept,” *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6 (2005), pp. 829-859.

⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 33.

⁶ Berthold Schoene-Harwood, *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 109.

⁷ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 59.

⁸ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 103.

Noonan, DeLillo makes it clear that Keith's actions derive from a position of insecurity rather than strength.⁹

The concept of masculinity, which appears to possess both strength and harm in the experiences of Lianne, is something that is being constantly vulnerable to tearing or injury. Keith's response to the attacks is to emotionally isolate himself, even in the context of his closest interpersonal connections. Terrence Real observes:

[j]ust as girls are pressured to yield that half of their human potential consonant with assertive action ... so are boys pressured to yield attributes of dependency, expressiveness, affiliation—all the self-concepts and skills that belong to the relational, emotive world ... The price of traditional socialization for boys is disconnection—from themselves, from their mothers, from those around them.¹⁰

According to masculinity theory, the concept of “normative masculinity”¹¹ as proposed by Connell, posits that it is a societal construct that establishes an unattainable standard for defining what it means to be a “real man” within a specific context. The novel portrays Keith in the North Tower of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001. DeLillo introduces a conventional portrayal of masculinity in the capitalist American society. Keith's embodiment of masculinity has equipped him with the necessary skills to effectively navigate the various obstacles he has deliberately undertaken in the realm of public engagement, including his professional endeavours, participation in poker, and aggressive physical pursuits. Ben Knights in *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (1999) states, “a man is as much a matter of style, of intentionally or unintentionally reproducing collective power, as it is one of innocently inhabiting a particular kind of consciousness.”¹² However, his encounter on September 11th, when the initial plane collides with the North Tower, quickly demonstrates that the attributes that have enabled him to navigate life successfully thus far are insufficient for the altered conditions he now faces. The trauma is represented physically in Keith, who has no bumps but is covered in the smoke, dirt, and blood of those who perished in the buildings. He becomes the embodiment of the chaos and turmoil of September 11th. Keith's society failed to provide him with the necessary ideas to navigate a situation that would question his dominant masculine authority, which granted him power and control inside American society. Twentieth century American sociologist, Michel Kimmel asserts, “American manhood is always more about the fear of falling than the excitement of rising, always more about the agony of defeat than the thrill of victory.”¹³ The symbolic significance of the tower's collapse lies in its representation of Keith's relinquishment of his entrenched masculine identity, reducing him to a mere survivor in the aftermath of the assaults.

⁹ Mary J. Parish, “9/11 and the Limitations of the *Man's Man* Construction of Masculinity in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2012), p. 188.

¹⁰ Terrence Real, *I Don't Want to Talk about It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 130.

¹¹ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 70.

¹² Ben Knights, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 14.

¹³ Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 218.

Keith Neudecker experiences profound personal change subsequent to witnessing the assaults on the north tower. He witnesses the demise of his acquaintance, Ramsey, at close proximity. He observes the demise of numerous individuals, "The movement was beneath him and then all around him, massive, something undreamed."¹⁴ Keith is afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and experiences distress that persists after the cessation of traumatic events. The depiction of men descending from the towers can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the decline of the human condition. The notion of the American White male as a figure of strength and dominance is challenged by the portrayal of Keith as sensitive and susceptible to the shifting dynamics of his era. Mary J. Parish points out that:

DeLillo enacts Keith's worst nightmare as he and the entire culture are made vulnerable by a terrifying and unexpected attack, apparently brought to their knees as the terrorist narrative undermines the dominant construction of American masculinity. Keith's experience on 9/11 causes him to plunge out of the world he has known into a now suddenly unpredictable and frightening future.¹⁵

Despite being physically separated from his wife and seven-year-old son, Keith, for nearly a year, Keith hastily makes his way towards his family from the north tower. The connection that he now establishes with his family implies that his personal encounter with the attacks has resulted in a notable transformation, rendering him a more compassionate, involved, and supportive individual, "truth of his life, that it was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly, not snatched in clumsy fistfuls."¹⁶ Lianne also confesses that Keith is "a man she'd never known before."¹⁷ Currently, he has a strong desire for human affection and friendship, which is suppressed by the societal norms under which he resides. Keith, who has been widely described as too reserved, appears to be embracing the pleasure of unveiling a hitherto concealed aspect of his personality. These changes occur instinctively for him regardless of his gender. The fact that he identifies as male does not impede his ability to display emotions. However, while experiencing a feeling of joy, he is unable to fully embrace and engage with the captivating sensation. He experiences a sense of unease and apprehension regarding the potential consequences associated with increased emotional closeness and personal revelation. As a result, he feels forced to restrict and regulate these experiences by adhering to the societal expectations and limitations imposed by traditional masculine gender norms.

Poker and the Masculine Space

Another notable characteristic of Keith is his inclination to seek solace in the game of poker. He used to play poker before the 9/11 attacks with his male friends but only a few times in a week. The space of poker playing signified a total masculine realm. He refrains from resuming his occupation as an estate attorney and making contributions to the capitalist system. The experience of residing within a casino environment provides a sense of security, authority, and

¹⁴ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 240.

¹⁵ Parish, "9/11 and the Limitations of the *Man's Man*", p. 189.

¹⁶ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 137.

¹⁷ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 59.

personal agency for him. The experience rekindles his sense of masculinity that he held dear prior to the assaults. His dominant masculinity is challenged by external forces as he finds himself in a state of vulnerability when confronted with acts of terrorism. Upon exiting the casino, he experiences a compelling sensation of paranoia. The presence of his male companions and the ambiance of the casino contribute to the preservation of his sense of manhood, “There’s a certain man, an archetype, he’s a model of dependability for his male friends, all the things a friend should be, an ally and confident, lends money, gives advice, loyal and so on, but sheer hell on women.”¹⁸ Keats’s internalization of gender roles confines him within a rigid and predetermined psychological framework, so impeding his ability to exhibit fluidity. Though his gender identity is fractured by the trauma of the attacks, he still continues to repress his natural impulses.

In American society, there is a disapproval of males exhibiting fear or being terrified, which is influenced by gender norms. This signals an existence that is being “performed” rather than lived. He exhibits a hesitancy to adapt to the evolving circumstances. He expresses a desire to persist in conforming to societal expectations regarding his assigned gender role, as articulated by Bulter. The casino serves as a sanctuary where he attains tranquillity and autonomy, “no flash of history or memory [that] he might unknowingly summon.”¹⁹ Keith demonstrates a lack of awareness regarding the occurrences of assaults, the passage of time, acts of terrorism, and the anticipated desires and expectations of his spouse, Lianne. Moreover, while playing Poker, he has a “choice of yes or no”²⁰ unlike the terrorist attacks that gave him no choice. Keith’s autonomy appears to have been significantly compromised as a result of the terrorist assaults, leaving him in a state of profound vulnerability and helplessness:

He thought for a moment he might get up and leave. He thought he might walk out and get the first plane, pack and go, get a window seat and lower the shade and fall asleep. He folded his cards and sat back. By the time a fresh deck floated up he was ready to play again.²¹

Feminine Subjectivity

It is quite probable that he is experiencing symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder. Keith exhibits a fragmented psyche, characterized by a profound disillusionment with all aspects of existence. The examination of his relationships with his wife Lianne and his lover Florence provides insight into distinct entities, namely the masculine and the feminine, and their respective reactions to the events of the 9/11 attacks. Keith seeks emotional support from Florence Givens, a fellow survivor of the terrorist attacks on the north tower, in order to validate his own emotions and experiences related to the events of 9/11. Florence, having also witnessed the atrocities, can empathize with Keith's feelings, “the only words that meant anything to him were the ones she’d spoken and would speak.”²² Florence, once again, expresses her emotions

¹⁸ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 59.

¹⁹ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 225.

²⁰ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 212.

²¹ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 229.

²² DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 92.

and recounts her personal encounter with the events that transpired on 9/11. As Butler puts it in *Gender Trouble*, Florence performs the role of the traumatised, devastated feminine gender, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.”²³ Florence demonstrates her ability to express her anguish and apprehension subsequent to the attacks, drawing upon her cultural upbringing which emphasizes the subjugation and psychological distress experienced by women at the hands of men. This is the very ordeal she experiences during the acts of terrorism done by a group of male terrorists. Florence assumes her gender role while recounting the distressing occurrences that transpired on the day of September 11th, repeatedly. Butler relates such performance of the feminine role as a mere cultural construct. Cathy Caruth asserts that a catastrophic event is never “assimilated or experienced fully at the time but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.”²⁴

Lianne expresses her concern about the attacks upon witnessing reruns of the attacks being broadcasted on television. She demonstrates empathy towards the victims and expresses concern for Keith, who managed to escape from the collapsing structure. She demonstrates an ability to empathize with those who have been harmed. She sustains her religious conviction through engaging in discussions about the divine and expressing her steadfast belief in the significance of communal involvement. She attends mass several times; “She was stuck with her doubts but liked sitting in church.”²⁵

The characterization of Keith as a protector invokes the romanticized notion of a strong and capable man, who possesses the ability to safeguard those in need and establish stability among turmoil. As Lianne confides in post 9/11 time, “You were stronger than I was. You helped me get here. I don’t know what would have happened. . . You were the one in the tower but I was the berserk.”²⁶ Similarly, Florence also states, “You saved my life, don’t you know that? . . . After what happened, so many gone, friends gone, people I worked with, I was nearly gone, nearly dead . . . Then you walked in the door.”²⁷ Keith appears to be weighed down by the imposition of stereotypical characteristics onto him. Women, too, have internalized these illusions of a masculine saviour. French existentialist Philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* (1949) elaborates this behaviour as a sheer cultural performance “the girl, since childhood and whether she intends to stay within or go beyond the bounds of femininity, has looked to the male for fulfilment and escape. he is the liberator; he is rich and, powerful, he holds the key to happiness.”²⁸ Throughout novel, Keith abstains from discussing the personal experiences and emotional reactions he experienced as a result of the attacks. His ‘macho’ image pushes him to repress his pain not articulate it. Peter Schwenger comments that

²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 34.

²⁴ Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and experience: Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 4-5.

²⁵ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 233.

²⁶ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 215.

²⁷ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 108.

²⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 328.

“as long as the emotion is restrained, held back, it hardly matters what the emotion itself is; it will retain a male integrity.”²⁹

The female characters in *Falling Man* exhibit a greater degree of patience and absorption in their reactions to the chaotic assaults, as compared to Keith. Both male and female individuals were deeply affected by the terrorist assault as Lianne frequently thinks, “The whole of existence frightens me.”³⁰ Yet, it is the female characters in the novel who are able to express their trauma and fear to some extent. They are able to confront the trauma with all of their emotions because they have internalized the gender roles of being obedient, subservient, and sympathetic. The American culture they live in validates women’s emotional expression, oppression, and devastation. Thus, acts of terrorism are another example of masculinity that call for tolerance and total self-surrender. Both Lianne and Florence contemplate the idea of God and hold the belief in God as the ultimate redeemer of humankind. Florence firmly asserts, “obey the laws of God’s universe, which teach us how small we are and where we’re all going to end up.”³¹ Lianne expresses her confusion regarding the presence of God as:

She thought that the hovering possible presence of God was the thing that created loneliness and doubt in the soul and she also thought that God was the thing, the entity existing outside space and time that resolved this doubt in the tonal power of a word, a voice.³²

In contrast, Keith completely rejects any notion of a divine being. He frequently visits his family; yet, he is unable to reconcile with his wife due to the constraints imposed by his traditional cultural norms, which prohibit him from establishing a lasting and harmonious bond with a woman. According to his mother-in-law, he had exhibited a pattern of engaging in multiple romantic relationships. He faces challenges in maintaining a stable and enduring sense of self, as societal expectations of masculinity necessitate the concealment of his authentic identity. This pressure compels him to consistently exhibit qualities such as emotional detachment, independence, strength, and self-reliance.

Thomas Bjerre in “Post-9/11 Literary Masculinities in Kalfus, DeLillo, and Hamid” discusses Ken Kalfus’s 2006 novel *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* in the context of problematic concerns around the creation of masculinity to explore the societal pressures placed upon males to achieve unattainable standards:

One of the issues that Kalfus satirizes over is America’s apparent need for male heroes and the way that this need has produced a macho ideal, an example of hegemonic masculinity which many men strive for even though they know it is an unreachable ideal. Marshall and Agent Robbins, two of the novel’s male characters, serve to disclose the impossible lure of male hero worship.³³

²⁹ Peter Schwenger, *Phallic Critiques: Masculinity and Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 44.

³⁰ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 118.

³¹ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 90.

³² DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 236.

³³ Thomas Bjerre, “Post-9/11 Literary Masculinities in Kalfus, DeLillo, and Hamid,” *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 67, no. 3 (2012), p. 245.

Florence repeatedly articulates her anguish and emotional response to the events she observed and experienced during the assaults. Lianne too, demonstrates empathy towards the victims, alongside Keith and other individuals who have endured the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. She not only comprehends their suffering. She engages in conducting workshops for individuals afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, stemming from the psychological distress experienced due to the traumatic events they endured. Furthermore, she displays a readiness to embrace potential changes in her relationship with Keith. She adeptly assumes the roles of a filial daughter, nurturing mother, and devoted wife, exhibiting exemplary conduct in light of the prevailing situations she encounters. She assumes the responsibility of internalizing and enduring all adversities in her life, all while fulfilling the societal expectations and obligations associated with her gender. Lianne's conduct can be comprehended within the framework of Beauvoir's conceptualization as "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presence in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine."³⁴

DeLillo consistently portrays her enduring connections with many individuals, including her immediate family, the community of Alzheimer's patients she regularly interacts with, the fellow attendees at Mass, and even the dead, encompassing not only her parents but others as well the unknown ones, "It was a comfort, feeling their presence, the dead she'd loved and all the other faceless others."³⁵ As Paul Giles states, "man is a social being who must work out his life and salvation through interaction with others."³⁶ Contrarily, Keith can be characterized as a disoriented individual. He has had a loss of self-awareness as a result of persistently suppressing his emotional distress. The novel aptly portrays the protagonist as the embodiment of the "falling man" archetype within the narrative, as he grapples with the constraints imposed by societal notions of masculinity, which severely limit his ability to express his authentic identity. His assimilation into American culture has effectively instilled the established standards of masculinity within his psyche, rendering any form of involvement in interpersonal connections or communal activities seemingly unattainable due to the inflexible social constructs around masculinity.

Keith's interactions with women exhibit a notable degree of instability, which can be attributed to the inherent instability of his masculinity. Prior to the September 11th incident, he had already had a separation from his spouse. His decision to live apart from his family indicates a state of disarray in his life. He would consume alcoholic beverages in the past. He previously exhibited aggressive behaviour. He had an unwavering and unyielding demeanour within the context of his marriage relationship. Keith's perception of masculinity was deeply influenced by American culture, resulting in a reluctance to engage in emotional connections. The dread of engaging in relationships with women is associated with the traditional concept of masculinity. Placing faith in a woman, confiding in her, and engaging in intimate relationships can be perceived as an act of yielding to the influence of feminist ideology. Ahmed Gamal in "Encounters with Strangeness' in the Post- 9/11 Novel", discusses John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) as "The will to mythologize women in terms of feminine otherness

³⁴ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 267.

³⁵ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 233.

³⁶ Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 526.

arises, according to the text, from an arguably perverse insistence on their contaminating impact on men.”³⁷ In *Terrorists*, the presence of women poses a potential distraction for jihadists, diverting their attention from their sacred mission of jihad.

Following the tragic events of the 9/11 attacks, Keith initiates a romantic relationship with Florence due to the profound shared experience they both endured during the assault on the north tower. Florence serves as a conduit for Keith's unexpressed emotions, namely the terror and pain experienced during the evacuation of the tower. His adherence to traditional gender norms prevents him from sharing his thoughts and feelings with Florence. He refrains from succumbing to the influence of the feminine and, in accordance with societal expectations of masculinity, terminates his relationship with Florence, so subjecting her to victimization. Florence had previously experienced victimization, “This was the old undoing that was always near, now come inevitably into her life again, an injury no less painful for being fated.”³⁸ Lianne’s mother, Nina’s comment that Keith is “to get a woman to do something she’ll be sorry for”³⁹ is considerably accurate.

In the end of the novel, Keith is situated in solitary confinement within a motel room, positioned in front of a window that is described as being covered in dust. He diligently engages in the repetitive execution of wrist exercises, which were prescribed to him as a kind of rehabilitation to aid in his recovery from the injury he incurred on September 11th. In this particular scenario, DeLillo effectively constructs a disconcerting and pitiful ambiance. Keith is portrayed as engaging in a hollow routine, persisting with therapy for a condition that is no longer there, all the while neglecting to acknowledge the profound wound that confines him within this bleak environment. Similarly in DeLillo’s *Mao II*, the character of Bill Gray, in the wake of the terrorist attacks, embarks on a journey that takes him from his isolated artistic retreat in upstate New York to various cosmopolitan cities such as New York City, London, Athens, and Cyprus. Ultimately, his life comes to an end aboard the ferry enroute to Jounieh.

Conclusion

Gender constructions are not determined by biological factors, but rather are shaped by the societal norms and expectations imposed upon individuals based on their assigned sex. The gender roles in question can be likened to rigid compartments that lack flexibility in adapting to societal changes. The imposition of rigid gender norms restricts an individual’s autonomy to align their life choices with their innate inclinations. The gender identities of the characters stay consistent and unchanging over the entirety of the work. Keith’s violent and domineering behaviour aligns with traditional masculine character traits. Throughout the novel, he maintains this gender identity despite being profoundly affected by the traumatic events of the 9/11 attacks. Florence and Lianne both conform to traditional gender stereotypes associated with femininity. While Florence assumes the role of the victim, experiencing grief, Lianne demonstrates characteristics such as tolerance, sympathy, affection, and submissiveness. The characters in the novel exhibit such deeply ingrained internalization of gender stereotypes that

³⁷ Ahmed Gamal, “‘Encounters with Strangeness’ in the Post- 9/11 Novel,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2012), p. 112.

³⁸ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 158.

³⁹ DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 12.

these roles persist without alteration throughout the text. Given the interconnectedness of gender roles with the power dynamics within a society, it appears imperative that certain gender roles remain unchanged. Although Keet occasionally demonstrates some adaptability in his response to the shifting circumstances following the attacks, the prevailing masculine norms of his society ultimately compel him to revert to his violent and emotionally aloof demeanour. The female characters in the story, including Lianne and Florence, experience victimization in a dual capacity. They are subjected to mistreatment by Keith, and are victimized by the terrorist attacks by a group of men. Additionally, these individuals experience the psychological distress resulting from the traumatic events they have endured. However, similar to Keith, they persist in conforming to the assigned gender roles imposed upon them.