

## **Narrating Trauma in Hoda Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (\*)**

**Laila Rizk**

Professor of English Literature Misr International University

### **Abstract**

Trauma theorists argue that narration is a powerful healing tool that enables the integration of the traumatic experience in trauma victims. When trauma survivors reconstruct their trauma memories into a coherent narrative, healing occurs. This paper examines the empowering role of narration for trauma victims in Hoda Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. *The Tiller of Waters* (2001) explores the past recollections of its traumatized protagonist in the context of the Lebanese civil war. Barakat focuses on the narrator's present life in the devastated city of Beirut and his memories of his family and his ancestors. *Falling Man* (2007) examines the traumatic effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on a survivor who has lived through the attack and on his estranged wife and son. The novel takes its title from a photograph by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew that captured the falling body of a man jumping from a window of the south tower of the World Trade Center on the morning of the attacks. Both writers, in their respective ways, explore the fractured identity of the survivors as they attempt to use narrative to find a way to move on following the life-changing catastrophes they experienced. Barakat and DeLillo experiment with innovative modes of narration including shifting narrative positions, multiple focalization, fragmentation, and intertextual references. The novels foreground the important role of narration in transforming traumatic memory into narrative memory, thereby empowering victims and giving them agency.

**Key Words:** Trauma, Memory, Narration, Don DeLillo, Hoda Barakat.

---

(\*) Narrating Trauma in Hoda Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Vol.11, Issue No.3, July 2022, pp.305-324.

## المخلص

يتناول البحث الدور الهام للسرد بالنسبة للناجين من الصدمة في رواية هدى بركات حارث المياه (٢٠٢١) ورواية دون ديليلو سقوط رجل (٢٠٢٩). فطبقاً لمنظري دراسات الصدمة، فإن القدرة على تذكر وسرد الأحداث المؤلمة يعد أداة علاجية قوية لتجاوز الصدمة، حيث ثبت أنه عندما يقوم الضحايا بإعادة ترتيب ذكرياتهم المؤلمة في قالب سردى متماسك يتم شفائهم بصورة أفضل. تتناول رواية حارث المياه الماضي المؤلم للشخصية الرئيسية أثناء الحرب الأهلية في لبنان حيث تركز الرواية على ذكرياته عن عائلته و أجداده وحياته في مدينة بيروت التي دمرتها الحرب الأهلية. وتتناول رواية سقوط رجل الآثار الصادمة لهجمات الحادي عشر من سبتمبر الإرهابية على أحد الناجين الذي عاش خلال الهجوم وعلى زوجته وابنه المنفصلين عنه. ويشير عنوان الرواية الى صورة شهيره التقطها مصور وكالة أسوشيتد برس رينشارد درو لرجل يقفز من نافذة البرج الجنوبي لمركز التجاره العالمى صباح يوم الحادى عشر من سبتمبر. ويبحث كلا من بركات و ديليلو في الهوية الممزقة للناجين أثناء محاولتهم استخدام السرد لإيجاد طريقة للمضى قدما بعد الصدمة. ويستخدم بركات وديليلو أنماطا مبتكرة من السرد تتضمن تعدد الأصوات السردية والتبئير المتعدد والنشظى والإشارات التناصية. وتوضح الروايتان الدور الهام للسرد في تحويل ذاكرة الصدمة الى ذاكرة سردية مما يسمح بتمكين ضحايا الصدمة و منحهم القوة.

## الكلمات المفتاحية:

الصدمة ، الذاكرة، السرد، دون ديليلو، هدى بركات.

In *Trauma and Recovery* (1994), Judith Herman argues that narration is a powerful healing tool that enables the integration of the traumatic experience in trauma victims. She points out that a trauma victim needs to reconstruct the traumatic event into "an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context" (144).

Similarly, Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart confirm the findings of French psychologist Pierre Janet (1859 – 1947), who distinguish between traumatic memory and narrative memory, and argue

that healing occurs when a trauma victim transforms traumatic memory into a coherent, assimilated narrative. They note, "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language" (447). Trauma survivors can only transform their trauma into meaningful experiences when they impose some narrative order on their traumatic memories. Once traumatic memory is transformed into narrative memory, healing from trauma occurs. Susan Brison points out the importance of narrating memories to enable trauma survivors to better cope with the trauma: "Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self" (71). In a similar vein, Wendy O'Brien refers to the healing power of narration which "brings some sort of coherence and continuity to events that have made the individual feel helpless and hopeless – lost and at a loss" (215). In her analysis of literary representations of trauma provoked by sexual violence, Deborah Horvitz also emphasizes the role of verbalization and narration in helping victims make sense of their trauma: "If traumatic events are not repressed, they can be *used*: victims remember and imagine stories to be repeated and passed on. That is, when the stories of the past are consciously recognized, the cycle of violence can end, because the *narratives*, not the sadomasochism or the trauma, are repeated and passed on" (134). In verbalizing their traumatic experiences, victims can come to an understanding of their own traumatized past and enter the healing process.

Michelle Balaev points out that contemporary approaches in literary trauma theory include alternative models that move away from "the focus on trauma as unrepresentable and toward a focus on the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience" (3). She argues that one drawback of this classic model of trauma as unrepresentable is that it "removes agency from the survivor by disregarding a survivor's knowledge of the experience and the self, which restricts trauma's variability and ignores the diverse values that

change over time" (6). Hence, the narration of traumatic events and memories empowers the trauma victim and gives him/her agency. Hoda Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters* (2001) and Don DeLillo's *Falling*

*Man* (2007), show a shift in theorizations of trauma from an emphasis on the ineffable and unspeakable, to a narrative mode of traumatic working. Both writers, in their respective ways, explore the fractured identity of the survivors as they attempt to use narrative to find a way to move on following the life-changing catastrophes they experienced. By focusing on modes of narration and forms of representation in the two novels, including shifting narrative positions, multiple and alternative focalization, fragmentation, temporal distortion, and intertextual references, I examine how both novels highlight the empowering role of narration for trauma victims.

Barakat, a Lebanese writer and one of the most distinctive voices in modern Arabic literature, has won widespread acclaim for her fiction. Barakat's novel, *The Tiller of Waters* (2001) (*Harith al-miyah*, 1998), winner of the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 2000, explores the relation between violence, war and masculinity in the context of the Lebanese civil war. The novel narrates the recollections of a disoriented man, traumatized by the chaos of the civil war in Beirut, and focuses on the devastating effects of war on people's lives and psyches. American writer Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), examines the effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on a survivor who has lived through the World Trade Center attack and on his estranged wife and son. The novel focuses on the trauma of the individual and reenacts the effects of the events in the minds of the survivors.

The Lebanese civil war (1975- 1990) has produced a rich body of fiction, namely a new genre of Lebanese Civil War Narratives. Many female authors, provoked by the intensity of wartime conditions and the ensuing destruction, focused on the trauma resulting from the civil war in Lebanon. Amyuni groups Barakat with a number of writers who explored the Lebanese civil war with the purpose of creating "scenarios within scenarios (figments of the protagonist's imagination, or real stories of the authors' experiences, one wonders) often closed up, or chopped up, embodying the fragmentation of city and self" (179). In *The Tiller of*

*Waters* Barakat explores the civil war and the trauma that its protagonist Niquila experiences. The novel's fragmented style and the multiple narrative lines reflect the disorientation and the division of the civil war. Barakat focuses on the narrator's present life in the devastated city of Beirut and his memories of his family and his ancestors. Set in downtown Beirut during the latter years of the civil war, the novel revolves around Niquila, a hallucinating, disoriented man who lost all connections with the present and is haunted by memories. As Hanna notes, Barakat "chooses to position the male psyche as central to her intricate investigations of the human in response to trauma and violence"(94). The novel is not a traditional trauma narrative that presents a character trying to cope with a past trauma; Niquila is in fact tormented with traumatic experiences in the present and therefore resorts to the memories of the past to cope with his trauma. The narrative alternates between the present and the past and interweaves the details of Niquila's everyday life during the civil war, with his memories of his family and his birth city Beirut. The past constantly intrudes on the present and traditional linearity is often ignored.

Similar to *The Tiller of Waters*, *Falling Man* deals with the domestic rather than the public and focuses on the trauma that its protagonist Keith Neudecker suffers from post-9/11. The *Falling Man* of the title refers to a performance artist who has staged falls at several locations in New York City, which recalls terrifying scenes of World Trade Center victims leaping from deadly heights to escape the spreading fire. The novel shifts forward and back in time, starting in the scenes of devastation at Ground Zero but ending in the WTC towers as the terrorist attack begins. Because trauma disrupts the individual's sense of time, one of the common features of trauma fiction is its reference to the distortion of time. Zeltner points out that trauma fiction is often characterized by its experimentation with the representation of time: "... the authors challenge their readers with such temporal devices: all novels work with a pattern of depicting past and present events without regard to chronology or linearity" (93). *Falling Man* presents a non-linear, fragmented plot that mirrors the confusion and disorientation of the victims. In the novel, the lack of chronological structure, the temporal distortion, and the lack of coherence replicate the symptoms of trauma.

Furthermore, the interplay of narrative voices and the frequent shifts in focalization in the novel indicate the fusion of past and present and underline the disruption in time and memory caused by traumatic events.

Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters* opens with Niqula who had inherited his father's profession as a textile merchant reminiscing about his family, the history of textiles, and his love story with his Kurdish maid, Shamsa. Finding himself with nowhere to go after his apartment was taken over by strangers during his brief stay with a friend, Niqula ends up living in the basement of his father's textile shop in the middle of the war-ravished city center. Traumatized by the civil war and leading a primitive life in the basement of his shop, Niqula has forgotten the landmarks of the city he grew up in: "I spent many days, perhaps weeks, standing in front of the chasms that had once been shops in Souq Tawile. It was not an easy matter to recollect their names or owners— even for me, who had grown up there" (24). He attempts to reorient himself with his war torn city by creating a new map: "I would not lose my way this time, I told myself. I would mark my path, and would give new names to streets and markets that I did not recognize. In my head I would draw a new map of these sites that had changed so much, losing their original feature" (61-2). Not daring to leave his father's shop because of the war, he loses track of the time and is unable to differentiate between his life in the past and the violent present: "... I wonder, had I been suspended from the passage of time, unaware of time's passage, ever since the events had begun and then had been transformed into war?" (25). Barakat uses decline and dissolution as recurrent motifs to reflect the chaos and violence of the civil war. Niqula's dehumanization is made clear in the animal-like existence he leads. He is ready to eat anything that crawls without repulsion: "Now, though, I can hardly stop eating, as if whatever I swallow does not stay for any amount of time in my stomach and cannot fill it. I have experimented, chewing and swallowing things I never got close to before ... Almost nothing repels me" (138). He describes his huge appetite and weight gain as a mark of decline; his fatness is a physical manifestation of the trauma: "My fatness, though, I think of as ugly, and its bloated look must be a result of my gluttony—and of my age. It is deterioration. Decadence" (139). Niqula also shows signs of mental decline when he is incapable of reacting to the people

who took over his apartment: "I found myself taken unawares by the hollowness I felt inside and by my refractory inability to react" (18).

Chaos and confusion also pervade the opening scene of *Falling Man*, which shows the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the first World Trade Center tower:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. ... This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting 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. ... 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. (3-4)

Keith, a lawyer, disoriented and covered in blood, accepts a ride in an old truck and shows at the door of Lianne, his estranged wife. Trapped in the trauma of the 9/11 moment, he is unable to explain why he came: "It's hard to reconstruct. I don't know how my mind was working"(21). Like Niqula who is both spatially and temporally disoriented, Keith's confusion is captured in the stream of consciousness mode and flashbacks that reveal his repressed thoughts and detachment: "Nothing seemed familiar, being here, in a family again, and he felt strange to himself, or always had, but it was different now because he was watching " (65). His wife Lianne notes that he "was not quite returned to his body yet" (59). On the way to his house to pick up some of his belongings a few days after the horrific attack, Keith explores the scene of devastation: "Everything was gray, it was limp and failed, storefronts behind corrugated steel shutters, a city somewhere else, under permanent siege, and a stink in the air that infiltrated the sky. ... The dead were everywhere, in the air, in the rubble, on rooftops nearby, in the breezes that carried from the river"(25). Looking around his house, Keith suffers from an intense feeling of loneliness: "He stood and looked and felt something so lonely he could touch it with his hand" (27). Keith's mental confusion does not allow him to process ordinary events. Walking through Central Park, he sees a woman on horseback in a yellow hat. The sight strikes him as "... something that belonged to

another landscape, something inserted, a conjuring that resembled for the briefest second some half-seen image only half believed in the seeing, when the witness wonders what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash" (103).

In his seminal study, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, La Capra notes that trauma victims "tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that these occurrences intrude on their present existence, for example, in flashbacks or in nightmares or in words that are compulsively repeated and that don't seem to have their ordinary meaning, because they're taking on different connotations from another situation, another place" (142-43). In *The Tiller of Waters*, Niqula's response to trauma manifests itself in many of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) including hallucinations, nightmares, flashbacks, and irrational fears. He describes his terror as he sees some roaming dogs nearby: "The howling rose, sharp and aggressive. It poured into my head, filling it instantly with terror. ... I saw the biggest of them dragging an indistinct mass with his jaws. He began to tear it apart, and then the others caught up to him ... But the head that rolled away, and toward me, was not a canine head. It belonged to a human being" (4950). He later questions himself whether what he saw was real: "Had yesterday's scenes come from my disturbed dreams or been the result of the fevers flaming inside my head?" (51). Confused and disoriented, wandering around in the devastated city, he cannot separate illusion from reality: "I walked on, led by the magic of the darkness, and by what I saw without truly seeing, what I saw by the light made by the illusions of my brain, or by the glow of the white stone walls, or perhaps by a real light coming from the other world above, reaching me by an avenue I did not know" (65-66). Niqula's primitive life in the deserted streets of the city provides the author with an opportunity to project images of devastation in war-ravaged Beirut. His decline is analogous to the destruction of the city, and the images of destruction and fear reflect Niqula's own alienation and disorientation.

Like Niqula, Keith in *Falling Man* is often haunted by his trauma through flashbacks. When he has surgery for his injured wrist, the last thing he remembers is his friend Rumsey who died before his eye: "...

but there was Rumsey in his chair by the window ... a dream, a waking image, whatever it was, Rumsey in the smoke, things coming down" (22). He uses the rehabilitation exercises for his hand to provide structure and sanity in his life: "His injury was slight but it wasn't the torn cartilage that was the subject of this effort. It was the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke" (40). Even though his wrist is fine, Keith still does the exercises two or three times a day: "He did not need the instruction sheet. It was automatic, the wrist extensions, the ulnar deviations, hand raised, forearm flat. He counted the seconds, he counted the repetitions" (106). Keith feels the need to repeat the experience in an attempt to achieve mastery over it. Such compulsive repetition, however, gives him a false sense of control and reflects his inability to deal with the trauma: "He wondered if he was becoming a self-operating mechanism, like a humanoid robot that understands two hundred voice commands, far-seeing, touch-sensitive but totally, rigidly controllable" (226). Three years after the attack, Keith still needs the routine:

The wrist was fine. But he sat in his hotel room, facing the window, hand curled into a gentle fist, thumb up in certain setups. He recalled phrases from the instruction sheet and recited them quietly, working on the hand shapes, the bend of the wrist toward the floor, the bend of the wrist toward the ceiling. (235)

In addition to the recurrent image of the performance artist, the Falling Man, which inhabits the novel and acts as a reminder of the victims who fell or jumped to their deaths from the towers, the trauma of 9/11 is also communicated through images of confinement. Keith, taking a scan, suffers from a "sense of helpless confinement" (18). He describes himself as a "trapped man" (19). Even years after the attack, he is still haunted by his trauma: "These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness" (230). Lianne describes herself waiting in line at the bakery as "strictly enforced, in a confined space" (38). In contrast, confined space is seen as a site of refuge in *The Tiller of Waters*: "Since Lebanese collective identity has always had shallow roots, escape into

private spaces can be seen as an attempt particularly by male characters to achieve a stable, coherent and non-contradictory identity" (Aghacy 83). In the middle of the chaos of the civil war, Niqula finds security in his father's small shop where he wraps himself up in the different fabrics. When Niqula enters the Mar Jirjis Cathedral and finds himself falling into a vault below the ground, he experiences a feeling of security: "All of my anxiety and fear seemed to fade away. My breathing grew regular, my limbs relaxed, and a gentle, pleasant sleepiness rose to my head" (69).

A key feature of trauma fiction is the multiple narrative voices and the shifts in focalization which reflect the chaos and confusion that the characters experience as a result of the trauma. *Falling Man* includes multiple perspectives and the narrative is focalized through many characters, including Keith, the protagonist, Lianne, his estranged wife, Florence, another survivor, as well as Hammad, one of the terrorists. Lianne's trauma surfaces in her continuing anxiety and need for safety. Doing everyday errands, she notes, "Running toward the far curb now, feeling like a skirt and blouse without a body, how good it felt, hiding behind the plastic shimmer of the dry cleaner's long sheath, which she held at arm's length, between her and the taxis, in selfdefense" (23). Lianne's fears and rage are expressed in outbursts of violence. Hitting her neighbor in the face because she was playing Middle Eastern music, she admits, "It was totally crazy. I could hear myself speaking. My voice was like it was coming from somebody else" (124). Lianne also suffers from sleep disorders: "I wake up at some point every night. Mind running non-stop. Can't stop it" (124). She tries to teach herself about the history, geography and people of the Middle East. She becomes obsessed with the traumatic images of the attacks as she continues to read and watch anything related to the event.

She is fixated on two still-life paintings by the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) that belong to her mother in which she sees the WTC towers in the two dark objects in the composition. The paintings of unremarkable bottles, boxes, jars, and vases are replaced by the association to death and terror. When Lianne visits an exhibition of Morandi's paintings at a gallery in Chelsea, she is again captivated by a

painting, a variation on one of the paintings her mother had owned: "She could not stop looking. There was something hidden in the painting. Nina's living room was there, memory and motion" (210). As Amfreville notes, "In a way that transcends her status as a character in a plot, she gathers several signifiers of death, suicide, memory and loss that serve as powerful counterpoints to the central trauma" (242). Lianne turns to religion in an attempt to find comfort, but she worries that "God would consume her. God would de-create her and she was too small and tame to resist" (235). However, at the end of the novel, Lianne manages to find some comfort in isolation: "She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue" (236).

In *The Tiller of Waters* the narrative is focalized at times through the father who represents an idealized past that is in sharp contrast with the violent present. The father who used to tell Niqula stories about cloth, laments the widespread values of the industrial age and calls it "the era of synthetic fabrics—the Age of Diolen" (8). He warns his son: "Diolen requires no conversation, demands no time. ... It is in a hurry, and it has no wish to escort those whose desires take them far. ... No, son—we are at the threshold of a new and different era. We are on the threshold of an age of illusion, dictating that everyone must have access to all" (140-41). By incorporating the father's narrative voice, Barakat lends the text a certain authority and points out the importance of keeping the past alive. Niqula's father believes that transmitting knowledge from the past is the responsibility of the survivors: "No, it isn't the end of anything for someone of your age, because you will see enough to correct the mistakes and straighten out what has gone crooked. Nothing disappears quite like that, gone forever as it begins to decay. ... Just look long and carefully at Diolen, and do not give in to forgetfulness" (142). Against the scenes of devastation of the city, young people need to be educated on how to preserve historical memory against collective amnesia. Summoning the past instills a sense of order; when people forget their history they are bound to disintegrate: "And when the words of the grandfathers begin to be forgotten, the knots and threads in the weaving begin to come undone and the world ends in fragments, shapeless, a dust cloud in the nebula" (129).

Michael points out the importance of storytelling to trauma survivors," ... the engagement in storytelling ... indicates the ways in which creating stories functions as a means of controlling as well as making some sense out of the chaotic and seemingly nonsensical events at hand" (12). In *The Tiller of Waters*, Niquila tells stories in an attempt to recover memories of his family and city before the civil war. Narrating the past becomes a process of empowerment that makes Niquila the author of his own personal history. Telling stories becomes a tool to fight the fragmentation of reality, the disintegration of his identity, and the sense of loss and confusion. In addition, it represents Niquila's connection to his pre-war past and serves as a means of symbolically rebuilding the history of his city, thereby confronting the trauma of the civil war. Barakat invokes classic myths to make a comparison between weaving and narration: "The Sumerian goddess of weaving, Tagtog, taught us that every pass of the shuttle on the loom weaves the words of our ancient ancestors, the words that enrich the memory we inherit and that we enrich in our turn" (129). Narration provides a connection with the past and preserves the collective memory of the nation. In narrating the past, Niquila resorts to the history of fabrics as a memory trigger. He immerses himself in the different fabrics in order to connect with the past of his family and his country:

... I would take off all my clothes and wrap myself in the length of fabric. ... I would press it against my skin, against every part of my body, to resuscitate my own intimate memories of that particular fabric in every detail—to go back, as if re-reading this memory of mine, finding there the features and elements of this bolt of cloth, page after page ... word by word ... letter by letter. (35-36)

Niquila describes his elation when he discovers that the lower level of his shop where they keep the natural fabrics is intact: "Yes, everything was just as it had been. Not even a trace of dust. I did not need to touch any of the tightly-rolled bolts of fabric to be sure of that. From the unique gleam sent off by each textile, each distinct weave, I knew. ... I think it was the most beautiful moment of my life, yes, since my birth" (23). Reminiscing about his childhood, Niquila remembers his father equating the mass production of ready-made clothes to loss of memory:

"Only from the middle of the last century did 'fashion' become a matter of repetitive loss of memory, for that was when the repugnant combinations began, the mongrel blend" (40). Following an incident where he was almost attacked by stray dogs as he wandered the abandoned streets, Niqula finds refuge in linen, "I was thinking ardently about the linen that awaited me at home, in which I would wrap myself—in that linen, exclusively. I would wind myself up in that linen and it would cure me. I would warm myself in that linen and I would recover" (52). Again, he summons the image of weaving fabric as an equivalent to telling tales: "In Arabic, look at the consonance of letters in *haki*, the telling of a tale, and *hiyaka*, weaving! The weaver is the one who 'makes' speech, and a person 'wears' his words" (128). Weaving, also likened to tilling, each having its own cycle, becomes a metaphor of how life is created: "Planting and tilling the soil are but the weaving of life, the coming and the going, like the movements of a loom, and like the cycle of day and night coming to us in rotation, and like the linkage between sky and earth, life and death" (128).

Critics often compare Niqula to Shahrazad, the iconic storyteller of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Al-Samman notes, "In Barakat's body of work, the collectivity of her male characters masquerade in a

Shahrazad-like fashion to tell the story of the city and the individual's burial in the sea of systematized violence and patrilineal paradigms" (167). Indeed, Niqula assumes the role of Shahrazad telling his lover

Shamsa stories about the different types of fabric and the history of Lebanon. He narrates his love story with Shamsa in terms of fabrics, starting with the story of linen: "Five thousand years ago the Pharaohs, whom Isis taught to weave linen, presented their gifts to her in the form of tiny statutes ... Of linen, they sewed the sails of their Nile-going boats: the sails of life" (58). Shamsa's purity is compared to linen: "Give me some of your linen, let me touch it. Lie yourself down inside of it and press it against your body, everywhere"(56). Niqula moves on to the story of velvet, a symbol of Shamsa's lost innocence and sexual maturity: "Shamsa abandoned her linen when she abandoned her shame at the nakedness of her body, the nakedness of her movement through the light

beneath my eyes. Shamsa forgot her shame when she began to learn velvet" (72). With the story of each fabric, Niquila constructs the history of his family and his country, thereby accessing his traumatic memory. Traumatized by the war, he attempts to put himself back together by arranging events of his past and his country's history chronologically, transforming them into a narrative. Understanding the past becomes a prerequisite to cope with the trauma of the present. As the text progresses, Shamsa matures both physically and intellectually, adding her own narrative. She narrates the story of her heritage and her family who moved from Iraqi Kurdistan to Beirut. Shamsa tells of the hardships that her people had suffered and asserts their courage and resilience: "... we reside in our courage and freedom, in our solitude and in our free flight over lands owned by others, across borders barbwired by identity papers and soldiers" (85).

In ways that are similar to *The Tiller of Waters*, DeLillo foregrounds the important role of narrating traumatic events and its healing power. Keith meets Florence, a fellow survivor of the attack, when he goes to her apartment to give her back her briefcase that he took by mistake in the confusion. She has not been able to speak about the attack and she feels the pressing need to verbalize what happened to them: "She wanted to tell him everything. This was clear to him. ... He knew she hadn't talked about this, not so intensely, to anyone else" (55). Florence narrates all the details of that morning, the smoke, the dead bodies, and the devastation: "She went through it slowly ... the collapsed ceilings and blocked stairwells, the smoke, always, and the fallen wall, the drywall, and she paused to search for the word and he waited, watching. ... She was dazed and had no sense of time, she said" (55). In her need to cope with the trauma, Florence struggles to organize her story in narrative terms: "She was talking to the room, to herself, he thought, talking back in time to some version of herself, a person who might confirm the grim familiarity of the moment. She wanted her feelings to register, officially, and needed to say the actual words, if not necessarily to him" (91). Keith, in turn, is eager to integrate the events into a chronology of his past life. Together, Keith and Florence whose shared experience of post-trauma stress creates a bond between them, engage in narrating the details of their escape from the tower. They find solace in

one another's stories as they attempt to construct a narrative of the traumatic events:

They drank tea and talked. She talked about the tower, going over it again, claustrophobically, the smoke, the fold of bodies, and he understood that they could talk about these things only with each other, in minute and dullest detail, but it would never be dull or too detailed because it was inside them now and because he needed to hear what he'd lost in the tracings of memory. This was their pitch of delirium, the dazed reality they'd shared in the stairwells, the deep shafts of spiraling men and women. (90 - 91)

Baelo-Allué points out that for survivors to overcome their trauma, they need to "assimilate traumatic memories in their existing mental schemes and turn them into narrative memory" (69). Unlike Florence, who is able to put her memories of the attacks into words, Keith fails to transform his traumatic memory into narrative memory in order to provide structure and coherence to his life. Keith's relationship with Florence was hollow and meaningless and their mutual witnessing could not heal his trauma. Keith describes their relationship as "a tryst without whisper or touch, set among strangers falling down" (133). Because their relationship was "unreal" and "an aberration," he fails to integrate his traumatic memories on a verbal level in order to create meaningful narratives (133). This lack of narrative memory makes him unable to move past the scenes of the dead and the destruction, and to continue to be haunted by his painful memories.

Keith and Florence are not the only characters looking for ways to verbalize their trauma in order to provide coherence to their lives.

DeLillo creates a parallel in a group of Alzheimer's patients, who struggle against the loss of memory. Lianne leads therapy workshops for patients in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease to help them retrieve personal memory through the act of writing. She encourages her patients to speak and write about their lives:

They wrote for roughly twenty minutes and then each, in turn, read aloud what he or she had written. Sometimes it scared her, the first signs of halting response, the losses and failings, the grim prefigurings that

issued now and then from a mind beginning to slide away from the adhesive friction that makes an individual possible. ... They worked into themselves, finding narratives that rolled and tumbled, and how natural it seemed to do this, tell stories about themselves. (30)

Alzheimer's patients, like trauma patients, need to recover their memories into a narrative to provide structure and coherence to their lives. For those patients, storytelling reflects their agency and enables them to gain more control over their illness. Lianne becomes attached to the group because they help her cope with another unresolved trauma, that of her father's dementia-driven suicide: "She needed these people. It was possible that the group meant more to her than it did to the members. There was something precious here, something that seeps and bleeds. These people were the living breath of the thing that killed her father"(61-62). Lianne dreads the loss of memory and the time when language might fail her as it has failed her father: "It was in the language, the inverted letters, the lost word at the end of a struggling sentence. It was in the handwriting that might melt into runoff" (30). She strongly identifies with Rosellen S., the Alzheimer patient who did not come back to the group because she could not remember where she lived: "This was an occasion that haunted Lianne, the breathless moment when things fall away, streets, names, all sense of direction and location, every fixed grid of memory" (156). When she suggested increasing the frequency of the group's meetings to twice a week, the supervising physician tells her, "It's theirs ... Don't make it yours" (60). *The Tiller of Waters* ends with Niqula reflecting on how his ending has come about. In a liminal space between life and death, Niqula speaks from beyond his death: "Who killed me? For I did not die a natural death. I did not see death coming so that I would recognize it and be able to meet it" (173). He wonders, "Was it stray bullets that felled me ... Or was I blown up by one of the landmines left by the soldiers who passed along the seashore one day, cursing and shouting in a language that I realized later was Hebrew?" (193) Niqula's soul visits Beirut on a beautiful September night where a stage and empty chairs are set for a concert of Fairuz, the iconic Lebanese singer. He sees the futility of his life and compares it to the pointless act of tilling water: "The sight makes me want to get up out of my chair and run in all directions. To till it well. Then I ask myself why

I should want to return to that. Have I not spent my entire life tilling the water? Isn't that what we always did, father?" (175) The title of the novel is taken from an epigraph attributed to Jorge Luis Borges: "I chanted the purple of Tyre, our mother. I chanted the works of those who discovered the alphabet and tilled the waters. I chanted the burnt sacrifice of the renowned queen. I chanted the masts and oars... and the piercing agonies" (v). The image of "tilling the waters" refers to the elusiveness of reality, the human delusion, and the emptiness and loss that the civil war has created. The epigraph pays homage to the ancestors and highlights the importance of oral history. Through reconstructing the history of his family and his ancestors, Niqula has found refuge during the trauma of the civil war.

*Falling Man* ends with Keith leaving home three years after the attack, to go to Las Vegas where he becomes a mediocre professional gambler "who wins, but not too much, not winnings of such proportions that he'd slip into someone else's skin" (227). To protect himself from his traumatic memories, he retreats to Las Vegas and finds solace in professional poker, which has "structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic" (211). Turning to poker gives him an illusory sense of control and enables him to avoid facing his trauma: "He was looking at pocket tens, waiting for the turn. These were the times when there was nothing outside, no flash of history or memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine run of cards" (225). However, Keith cannot completely escape the post- 9/11 realities because, as he admits, "every time he boarded a flight he glanced at faces on both sides of the aisle, trying to spot the man or men who might be a danger to them all" (198). The novel ends almost where it began, with the collapse of the towers as the attack begins, and the stories of Keith and Hammad, one of the hijackers aboard American Airlines Flight 11, merging into one narrative. As the plane is about to crash, Hammad watches a water bottle "spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall" (239). The novel ends with Keith running out of the building, covered in blood, glass, and dust: "That's where everything was, all around him, falling away, street signs,

people, things he could not name. Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life" (246). Unable to recover from his trauma, Keith is still haunted by the image of a shirt falling from the towers during his escape in the attack: "He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it" (242).

In this article, I have compared two novels from different backgrounds dealing with the 15-year Lebanese civil war and the 9/11 attacks. Both texts portray protagonists who attempt to translate traumatic memory into narrative memory to achieve a degree of healing. They both use a nonlinear plot, repetition, the interplay of narrative voices, and temporal disorientation to highlight the confusion and disorientation of trauma victims. The two texts highlight narration as a useful tool for the reconstruction of the traumatized self. In contrast to the classic model of trauma as unrepresentable, they empower their protagonists through narration and the ability to communicate.

However, while *The Tiller of Waters* gives its protagonist some agency through re-telling stories of the past, enabling him to access his prewar memory and cope with his traumatic experience, *Falling Man* ends with its protagonist possessed by the painful past, with no possibility of working through the trauma. As civil war ravishes his country, Niqula in *The Tiller of Waters* copes with his present trauma and the legacy of violence by telling stories that reconstruct his family's and country's history. His storytelling becomes an important part in the process of working through in which he tries to distinguish between the past and the present and gain critical distance from the trauma. Keith in *Falling Man*, on the other hand, tends to act out his traumatic past and fails to assimilate new experiences. Because he is unable to integrate his traumatic memories into a coherent narrative, healing does not occur.

*Works Cited*

- Aghacy, Samira. "Domestic Spaces in Lebanese War Fiction: Entrapment or Liberation?" *Crisis and Memory. The Representation of Space in Modern Levantine Narrative*, edited by Ken Seigneurie, Reichert Verlag Wiesbaden, 2003, pp. 83 – 99.
- Al-Samman, Hanadi. *Anxiety of Erasure. Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writings*. Syracuse UP, 2015.
- Amfreville, Marc. "The Paradoxical Foregrounding of the Intimate in the Representation of a National Trauma: 9/11, According to Don DeLillo." *Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny. Trauma and Ethics in Contemporary British and American Literature*, edited by Dolores Herrero and Sonia BaeloAllué, Universitätsverlag Winter Heidelberg, 2011, pp. 237-48.
- Amyuni, Mona Takieddine. "Style as Politics in the Poems and Novels of Rashid al-Daif." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, May 1996, pp. 177-192.  
*JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/176423](http://www.jstor.org/stable/176423).
- Baelo-Allué, Sonia. "9/11 and the Psychic Trauma Novel: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*." *Atlantis, Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, June 2012, pp. 63-79.  
*JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/43486021](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43486021).
- Balaev, Michelle, editor. *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Barakat, Hoda. *The Tiller of Waters*. Translated by Marilyn Booth, The American U in Cairo P, 2001.
- Brison, Susan. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton UP, 2002.
- DeLillo, Don. *Falling Man*. Picador, 2007.

- Hanna, Kifah. *Feminism and Avant-Garde: Aesthetics in the Levantine Novel*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Pandora, 1994.
- Horvitz, Deborah M. *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*. SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture, edited by Henry Sussman, State University of New York Press, 2000.
- La Capra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
- Michael, Magali Cornier. *Narrative Innovation in 9/11 Fiction*. Rodopi, 2014.
- O'Brien, Wendy. "Telling Time: Literature, Temporality and Trauma." *Analecta Husserliana, The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, vol. 86. *Temporality in Life as Seen Through Literature, Contributions to Phenomenology of Life*, edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Springer, 2007, pp. 209-221.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel, and Onno Van der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." *American Imago*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 1991, pp. 425- 454.
- Zeltner, Jessica. *When the Center Fell Apart. The Treatment of September 11 in Selected Anglophone Narratives*. Peter Lang GmbH, 2012.