



Oana-Celia Gheorghiu. 2018.  
*British and American  
Representations of 9/11.  
Literature, Politics and the Media.*  
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*“I contend that the events of 9/11, whose traumatic implications cannot be denied, are relevant for the United States’ historical self-assessment. Their displacement from the streets of Manhattan to **Fiction Avenue** is bound to provide the critic with an array of evaluation tools more relevant to the political “ways of the world”, instead of settling for psychological insights into the thoughts and sensations experienced by immediate witnesses of the catastrophe” (Gheorghiu 2018: 4).*

Oana-Celia Gheorghiu is a Lecturer PhD at “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați, where she teaches translation courses, British Culture and Civilisation and Cultural Representations in the Anglophone Space. Oana-Celia Gheorghiu holds a doctorate degree in English and American Literature (2016) and an M.A. diploma in Translation Studies (2013). Author of more than 20 translations (especially of contemporary fiction), Oana-Celia Gheorghiu proposes, through her book published with the renowned Palgrave Macmillan, a transposition in Anglo-American literature of the event that not only did mark the history of the United States of America, but also the history of the world after 2001: the attacks on the World Trade Center.

The titles that the author tackles from different perspectives, but which are bound by the same real story (or fictionalized reality, as she puts

it) belong to American (Don DeLillo and Amy Waldman) and British writers (Iain Banks, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis and David Hare). A special case is that of Mohsin Hamid, a Pakistani author who lived in both the US and UK and holds British citizenship. The book is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, and the volumes, selected with a view to tackling the representations of what history filed under 9/11, were published between 2002 and 2011.

Built as an inroad in what had triggered the attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, in the zeitgeist of the age, the volume opens more Pandora boxes, which seem, at times, unfathomable and impossible to superimpose. They remain different from each other, while still completing a yet unfinished picture of social-psycho-political history.

The theoretical frameworks approached allow the author to highlight the way in which the political, economic, historical, and physical blow on humanity was transposed in the journalistic-political realism of English-language writing. On the border between realism and fiction, just as the volumes that it scientifically dissects, operating with scientific concepts and methods of analysis, but also with official reports (*9/11 Commission Report*, 2015) and the media (*The New York Times*, *CNN*, *The Guardian*), the book brings forth authors who borrowed discursive styles from their professions (journalists) and transposed them in the literary area (in novels, short stories or plays).

The neo-realist fiction of the novelists under focus - Martin Amis, Iain Banks, Don DeLillo, Mohsin Hamid, Ian McEwan and Amy Waldman - takes shape around topic of global politics, ideological controversies, trauma (emerging from the tragedy of those left to mourn their family and friends lost in the 9/11 attacks).

The volume *British and American Representations of 9/11. Literature, Politics and the Media* is structured into two parts: the former, "Encoding 9/11 in the Media and the Literary Text" is a preamble for the latter, through the all-encompassing and theoretically grounded definition that Oana-Celia Gheorghiu constructs for the phenomenon that shocked the world, 9/11, and for the way in which it was perceived by the media, political and literary worlds in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An initial frame of 'real facts', as they were seen on TV and in the written media, "encodings" as a synonym of interpretation, which made up the literature, as synonym of the entire popular culture born from an event catalogued as a terrorist act, with extremely serious consequences. (Beyond its consequences, a terrorist act is still a terrorist act, anyway).

The latter half lays emphasis on the way in which literature 'translated' the event, taking over its gravity, implications, and consequences (death, alienation, fear verging on terror, psychological rupture, etc.). This part is dedicated to the intertwinement of identity and the ideological reconfigurations in themes customarily employed in literary pieces selected for this study: the shattered Self of the West, and the *extreme* Other - identified with the East (and with its often associations with terrorism).

The worlds in the texts analysed may seem fictional, but the elements identified by the author of the study are in close relation to the images that arrested all television screens in the world on the day of September 11, 2001. The resemblance to film scripts like *Independence Day* is also abundant, but the metaphors and symbols employed suggest moments of horror and the end of the world for those who lived them: "(...) novelists, such as Don DeLillo or Ian McEwan, described the events by starting with their unreality, their eerie resemblance to a feature film, and their metaphorical and symbolic nature. It seemed reasonable, then, that an event so surrounded by an aura of fictionality and yet so very real, and with such serious consequences at the level of global geopolitics could draw the attention of the creators of fiction, while also remaining a major topic for politicians and journalists" (1-2).

Literature becomes a means of representing the unrepresentable, as the author claims, assigning it this role precisely to motivate, somehow, the ampleness of the topic (with its multiple unsuspected socio-political and especially emotional implications) and the temporal limitation of the titles considered in the thorough discussion on the representations of the 9/11 phenomenon. The sentiment of trauma (as both experience and loss) is brought to the fore by narratological means used as adjuvant in the treatment required for subsequent survival: "Trauma is an important component of these writings, which justifies the niche of 9/11 fiction criticism being occupied, for the largest part, by analyses inspired by trauma studies" (6). Fiction is, nonetheless, just a faithful follower of the cultural and political worlds in which it is built, and the journalistic, political and literary discourses that the author analyses are not necessarily mirrors of reality, but rather representations of the worlds that they describe/ reconstruct.

The first chapter is, in fact, an introduction to the theme and an outline of the concepts operational throughout the book (representation, discourse, fiction, realism and neorealism, postmodernism and post-

postmodernism), but also an informed literature review of the critical works on literary discourses inspired by the terrorist act (Ann Keniston, Jeanne Follansbee Quinn - *Literature after 9/11*, Martin Randall - *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*, Richard Gray- *After the Fall: America Literature since 9/11*). It is also here that the author points out the way in which she has envisaged her entire work so as to highlight "the marks of the political and media discourses [that] can be traced at the level of fiction, with the attempt to prove that their imprint is manifest through context and text" (7).

The second chapter, although integrated into a first part distinct from the first chapter, is a natural follow-up to this one, outlining the historical context of the attacks on September 11. This contextualisation is mostly based on the *9/11 Commission Report*, the document of greatest official strength known to the general public. Adding to this are selections of television news (CNN, live broadcasts from the location of the event, but also televised interventions of the President in office, George W. Bush). Then, the author also tackles the news, analyses and other materials published by the written press in the following days (*The Guardian*, *The New York Times*). It is, basically, an analysis of the 'hot', 'breaking news' material delivered to the public space with regard to the shock-event of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: "September 2001 does not prove particularly rewarding in providing commentaries and analyses on the facts - the media are simply content to quote official statements, and supply news on the developments of war strategy", "the following day, 12 September 2001, belongs to newspapers: the written media around the world provide detailed coverage of the events of the previous day" (36).

After making reference to some literary titles that reproduce fragments initially published in media articles by their authors (*The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* and *Saturday*, by Martin Amis and, respectively, Ian McEwan), Chapter III brings to limelight the literary rewritings of history (of the event in question) and politics after 9/11. Two novels written by British authors - Scottish Iain Banks's *Dead Air* (2002), and *Saturday* (2005) by Ian McEwan, and the play *Stuff Happens* (2004) by David Hare are the starting points for highlighting the way in which politics and the news have become topics of contemporary fiction. 'Political novels' are, in fact, fictions that share elements of politics and history, as pretexts for a realistic imaginary or, at least, one as closest as possible to what could be true: "While the novel [*Dead Air*] may not be the best commercial thriller in the market despite ticking the boxes of being easy to read, fun and adrenaline-fueled (...), it constitutes a rewarding reassessment of contemporary

politics and of the role of the media, in their fictional rewriting, reinterpretation or representation" (56-57). The preliminary conclusion at this point is that all three literary texts present a constant of bidirectionality: on the one hand, reality itself can contain elements of fiction, while fiction may be used to reveal some truths.

The second part (made up of two chapters, *The Shattered Self of the West* and *Extreme Otherness: 'The Muslim Menace'*, which actually subsume the most consistent development of the book) debuts with a Chapter IV in which the concept of identity is processed through the help of ideological reconfigurations. Fiction and, at the same time, non-fiction in the texts brought under the lens, influence, in the author's opinion, the idea of identity and collective unconscious through ideology. The two chapters are mirrors of the Self/Other (East/West) dichotomy. A world's collapse, represented by the fall of the Twin Towers, also marks the collapse of personality, manifest through trauma, melancholy and social unease. The idea that this chapter underlines is that "while the West is regarded as the antagonist Other by the Islamic fundamentalist, the attacks on the WTC being an attack on the entire Western civilisation, and not just an attack on America, a (tense) relationship between selves is also apparent at an inner level" (94). The disaster at the WTC is an attack to one's self, too. But, for the British authors, the event remains at certain distance, not only geographical, but also emotional, as it happened to someone else. The two novels written by American authors - Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011), but also *Dead Air* (2002) by Iain Banks, are analysed through a constant toing and froing between Americanism and anti-Americanism, between the America as seen by Americans and America as seen by the Brits - another America, one that brought Americanisation in the British culture and that contaminated the English language. In one word - a blamed Americanisation. East and West, although apparently shaking hands to (re)kindle solidarity and safety, appear now split into Islamophobic reactions to Occidentalism. The East/West rupture is also obvious in literature, and the American hegemony is one reason, as David Hare seems to imply (*Stuff Happens*), while the other is an East seen as terrorist.

Chapter V brings clarifications on the concept of representations, used antithetically with the support of two theories: Orientalism and Occidentalism (the latter, as a reaction to Edward Said's 1978 Orientalist theory). The two spaces become two worlds, represented through statements of leaders (e.g. Muslim fundamentalist thinkers) or capital

events – portraits of normal people become murderers as a result of their political and religious indoctrination. Stereotyping is ever present in the literary constructions under focus. The texts analysed in this chapter are: *The Last Day of Muhammad Atta* (2006) by Martin Amis, *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo, *Submission* by Amy Waldman and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid. The plots are not entirely fictional, says the author, as there are multiple real elements from where the storytelling thread starts to spin. Every Other, a Muslim Other, is reconstructed through the eyes of the Self as an image/representation: "(...) a certain Other is perceived as significantly different and, in many cases, more dangerous than other Others" (161). The syntagm 'The Muslim Menace' used by the author as title for her last chapter (and borrowed from the preface to the third edition of Edward Said's *Orientalism* – 2013) "is intended to point to a constructed image/ representation of the Muslim Other, whose identification in contemporary pieces of British and American literature is the primary objective of this undertaken" (161). Thus, the East is constructed through the Westerners' eyes, as Said, cited by the author, claims (162), while the West is an Eastern construct, thus creating stereotypical images, oftentimes distorted, on both sides (177).

Terrorism is also debated at an ideological level in DeLillo's novel, *Falling Man*. Here too, *us* (with reference to the Americans) becomes the opposite of *them*: "The axis of time DeLillo imagines accentuates the difference between us (the Americans in his particular case, but standing for the entire Western civilisation) and *them*: neither we nor they are living in the present; contemporaneity could not be more relative" (198).

Cultural memory is recreated through representations, and these representations themselves are art. Also art is what Oana-Celia Gheorghiu has created by publishing her book on an epochal event of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a prestigious publishing house. The scientific effort is remarkable, the depth of analyses is undeniable, and the topicality of the topic makes the book an interesting read not only for academics, but also for people interested in the history of the superpowers of the present-day world.