

REVIEW

Florian Andrei Vlad, *Lights and Shadows in the Post-9/11 Age: Literature, Trauma, and Geopolitics*. Bucharest: Editura Universitara, 2021

Andreea COSMA
Ovidius University Constanta

Abstract: This paper reviews Florian Andrei Vlad's *Lights and Shadows in the Post-9/11 Age: Literature, Trauma, and Geopolitics*, a work that applies trauma theory on three contemporary prose writings that tackle 9/11: John Updike's *Terrorist*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. The close reading chapters, together with the introduction to trauma theory and the overview of the geopolitical context of the event build up a complete picture that reveals the consequences produced by the attack at a psychological, social, and cultural level.

Keywords: post-9/11, trauma, contemporary, American, literature.

Andrei Vlad's *Lights and Shadows in the Post-9/11 Age: Literature, Trauma, and Geopolitics* (2021) outlines important works on 9/11, and faithfully portrays the intersections between theoretical, historical, cultural and literary representations of this traumatic event. Edward Soja notes in his *Thirdspace*¹ (1996), that "no lived space – is ever completely knowable no matter what perspective we take, just as no one's life is ever completely knowable, no matter how artful or rigorous the biographer" (310). *Lights and Shadows* offers new approaches over some of the remaining gaps in what concerns the literary responses to 9/11 and presents its aim from the very beginning, which is that of "making sense of the meaninglessness of the hard facts of that day" (32) and fulfilling the challenge of describing ways of coping with trauma, rather than explaining the complexity of the victims' suffering. Florian Andrei Vlad, the author of *Lights and Shadows in the Post-9/11 Age: Literature, Trauma, and Geopolitics* is an associate professor at "Ovidius" University Constanta, where he has been teaching British and Americana literature. Other books authored by him are: *Fictional Americas at War*, *Rewriting the American Culturescape*, and *Space, Place, Narrative in John P. Quinn's Poetry*. He also co-authored *Literary Selves and Identity Narratives in the First American Century* and *British Gothic and Its Travelling Companions*.

The first chapter of *Lights and Shadows*, titled "9/11: The End of the American Century?" debates whether the 9/11 event marks the end of an era. While the deadline remains relative, the section notes that it is important to acknowledge the United States' constant development, socio-political transformation, and contribution to the global spectrum. The following section of the book, "Some of the Hard Facts of 9/11," serves as an overview on how the 11th of September, 2001 unfolded and confers a better understanding of the event's cultural representations. The book chapter successfully

¹ Soja, Edward. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996.

decodes these hard facts, by presenting them in a thorough, yet easy to visualize manner. The next chapters, “Words and Geopolitical Landmark: G.W. Bush’s War on Terror Speech” and “Responses to the Shadows of 9/11 and Its Accompanying War on Terror,” focus on the aftermath of 9/11. As it is noted in the book, the analysis of the years following the attack emphasizes the War on Terror as “an ideological clash rather than a civilizational one, in which the two protagonists are symbolically seen as freedom vs. totalitarianism” (40). The subsequent sections, “Trauma, an Outline Dealing with the Unrepresentable” and “The 1990s and What Followed; Contemporary Trauma Theory” present the main bibliographic references and critical approaches that are applied in the following chapters: Freud’s works from the early twentieth century as well as more recent researchers such as Dominick LaCapra, Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth, and Shoshana Felman.

The last three sections of the book, “Whose Terrorist?: Updike’s,” “Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*: From Melancholia to Mourning,” and “Working through or succumbing to melancholia in the havoc of 9/11: DeLillo’s *Falling Man*,” present the three novels under investigation and serve as the close reading chapters. John Updike’s *Terrorist* is portrayed as a “creative, un-stereotypical response to the meaninglessness of 9/11” (101), as emphasized by the book. The chapter compares and contrasts the different features that construct Ahmed’s identity and emphasizes the scenes in which he adheres to some of the expected stereotypes related to Islamic fundamentalists. The literary cartography of the novel, analyzed in the study underlines the post 9/11 atmosphere of New York and portrays the symbolism behind some of the key places illustrated in the narrative: the Lincoln Tunnel, New Prospect, and Manhattan. As the author argues, these places link the “beginning of the novel in the smaller symbolic space assumed by the New Prospect topography and the openly symbolic and iconic post 9/11 Manhattan” (92). Ahmed’s position in relation to New Prospect and New York reveals both a blueprint of the existent social challenges and a psychological assessment of Ahmed’s identity and inner “demons.” This social vs. personal screening of the protagonist highlights the novel’s main aim, to serve as a “critique of America” (102) and to shed light on people’s struggle to deal with trauma, the “unrepresentable,” and its lingering shadows. The study follows the symbols that reveal Ahmed’s agenda and points out the irony used by Updike as a subversive tool that challenges the reader’s understanding of authority, majority and minority.

The analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* underlines, as the author notes, “ways to cope with the unrepresentable, employing comic scenes and artificial techniques, challenging traumatic paralysis, defying it by means of artistic playfulness” (130). There are various parallels drawn between Foer’s novel and other relevant works such as Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, in terms of one’s attempts to cope with “trauma and alienation from a phony world” (107) or Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, which portray “creative conversations” (107) in a way that is similar to Foer’s style. The chapter follows Oskar on his journey to cope with trauma and to find the answer that would bring him closure for the abrupt disappearance of his father. Moreover, this section of the book portrays

how the grief experienced by the child as a manifestation of trauma is turned by Foer into a “meaningful narrative” (121). The author highlights Foer’s writing technique by calling it “a playful format” and offers examples of scenes whose despairing context was turned into a “positive, regenerative narrative” (119). In this respect, as the title of the section also points out, trauma is analyzed in Oskar’s case from melancholia (a negative state) to mourning (a positive, healthy way of dealing with loss). The topic of whether language is fully able to represent trauma is also raised and a discussion on the roles that literary representations can take reveals the fact that these roles are concerned with conveying significance rather than “faithfully reflecting reality” (108).

In the last chapter, Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* is shown from the vantage point of trauma theories that focus on repression and the difficulty to speak about such disturbing facts. The section underlines the “sense of fragmentariness and disjointedness” that the narrative relays. The study focuses on the unrepressed pieces of memory corresponding to the 9/11 attack that haunt the characters and how they respond to these figments of the event that each one recalls. The author offers important insights into DeLillo’s story, like the contrasts between Hammad, “a falling man or a fallen man” in comparison with “the real falling people” from the World Trade Center (149). Another such scene, identified by the author refers to the shift of perspective from Hammad, the villain, to Keith, the victim. One key aspect that this section points out about *Falling Man* refers to “the dehumanizing effect that the postmodern condition has” (155). In this way, the author points out in the chapter that Keith’s troubled attempts to “regain his self-worth” (154) together with the struggles that the other characters go through in order to cope with the tragic event serve as representations of ways in which people deal with trauma and they contribute to the creation of a bigger picture that the grand narrative of terrorism portrays.

Lights and Shadows underlines the importance of cultural debates and presents contemporary literary productions on the topic of trauma, which could be perceived as a cathartic experience, a documentation of the events that took place, and as a way of raising awareness on the impact that conflict, loss, alienation and shock have over people and over the American society as a whole. As the author notes, “each of these novels, while contributing to the overall response to 9/11, is one of its kind, a specific expression of artistic vision” (104). The book offers a balanced outlook on theory, history and literary analysis on the topic of 9/11 and makes attentive remarks on the three authors’ creativity, style, subversiveness, and dedication to successfully convey a representation of the “unrepresentable” through an artistic approach like creative writing. As *Lights and Shadows* points out, some of the means through which these authors managed to discuss and relay the psychological complexity of trauma through their characters and settings refer to Updike’s irony, Foer’s playfulness and DeLillo’s use of fragmentariness.

The book is recommended for scholars and students of American Studies that conduct research on the 9/11 event, on trauma theory and contemporary literature. *Lights and Shadows* offers a comprehensive perspective over 9/11 and serves in the first part as a theoretical and historical study of the attack and as a literary analysis in

the second one. The insights that this book provides, on the way that trauma is represented in literature reveal how coping mechanisms work in such cases and help at conveying a clearer view over the effects of this terrifying, yet mournful day, September 11, 2001.