

**Who Is 'Us' and Who Is 'Them' in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*?**

**Hossein Pirnajmuddin, University of Isfahan, I. R. Iran**

**Abbasali Borhan, Shiraz University, I. R. Iran**

**Abstract**

Don DeLillo, in his first post-9/11 novel *Cosmopolis*, addresses the question of (terrorist) Other as occupying an infiltrating position within the American society as the host community. He purports to make a diagnosis of the deficiencies inherent in the West's global capitalist system which make it "vulnerable" and exposed to the terrorists' violence. Underlying DeLillo's approach toward terrorism in this novel is the discourse of American liberal cosmopolitanism in terms of which American society is portrayed as "the land of the free;" a "hybrid" society constituted by "heterogeneous" ethnicities with different systems of values and beliefs. This dynamic multiculturalism, so is claimed, brings about clashes, gaps, and cracks within the American community as a whole and accordingly jeopardizes the solidity of American culture. What is taken for granted is validity of the governmental account of terrorism. Adopting an ambiguous position toward this discourse, DeLillo both endorses it and subverts, through parody, some of its affiliated precepts. In this article, first DeLillo's insular representation of a "Cosmopolitan" America as a "superpower" is explored and then his subliminal registration of an Orientalized other evoking 9/11 "us/them" paradigm is brought to light.

**Keywords:** Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, American multiculturalism, us/them, Orientalism, 9/11.

**1. Introduction**

The rippling impact of 9/11 "terrorist"<sup>1</sup> events across American fiction has admittedly been far and wide. Since then, many writers have gone to the trouble of addressing the traumatic event in different ways. Yet, only a few of them are recognized as having the required "imagination of disaster," in Henry James' words, to shoulder this responsibility. The critically acclaimed Don DeLillo is

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that terms like 9/11 'terrorist event (s) /attack (s),' almost always used to refer to the event, of course inscribe the official account excluding the 'other' accounts, mainly the theory, based on many an unanswered question about the why and how of what happened, that it was engineered by (some elements inside) the US government or American power structure. One very rare, and also very notable, instance of giving voice to these 'different' accounts is Amiri Baraka's poem "Somebody Blew Up America" (2011).

credited as one of such writers whose fiction – pre and post 9/11 – has a lot to do with terrorism in its broadest sense. The September 11 event, nevertheless, seems to have had an ironic impact upon DeLillo's fiction. On the one hand, it has brought a new dimension to DeLillo's writings whose consistent forebodings about the rise of "anti-Western" movements in the Middle East is said to have anticipated 9/11, hence being heralded as "prescient"<sup>2</sup> and "prophetic;"<sup>3</sup> (Passaro, 1; Junod, 1; Conte, 180). For instance, the very Twin Towers becomes one of the dominant images frequently showing up in DeLillo's novels. Expressing his surprise at the cover photograph of *Underworld*, Vince Passaro says:

there it was, the two towers, dark and enshrouded (by fog, much as they had been by smoke early last Tuesday morning); before them the stark silhouette of the belfry of a nearby Church ... and off to the side, a large bird, a gull or a large pigeon, making its way toward Tower One. It's eerie and religious. (1)

Tom Junod's review article "The Man Who Invented 9/11" similarly follows up the same theme in DeLillo's *Falling Man*. He says: "[i]t is the irony here: the Don DeLillo novel became the template for 9/11; now 9/11 returns the favor, and becomes the template for a Don DeLillo novel. He gets it right because he already *got it right*" (1).

On the other hand and oddly enough, 9/11 event can be seen as heralding a death knell for DeLillo's largely admitted "premonitory" quality of writing. This unfortunate effect is evident in *Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega*, the major novels written in the wake of 9/11. The first two can at best be

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, DeLillo himself seems to be cherishing the same view of his works. In an interview, when asked if he is "surprised at how often [he] anticipate[s] history in [his] books," DeLillo says: "maybe I do see some things more clearly and a little earlier than others do" ("Interview," 1).

<sup>3</sup> Amused at this quality, Meghan O'Rourke, for instance, observes: "rereading some of [DeLillo's] earlier books, including the terrorism-riddled *Mao II*, I wondered, half-seriously, if Mohamed Atta and crew had been studying DeLillo" (1).

deemed an extension of the project DeLillo specifically initiates with *Mao II*, which is to fashion a rising threat of terrorism rooted in the Middle East and directed against the West. These novels lack the "premonitory" quality or in Joseph M. Conte's adoring words, "the gift of the novelist for expressing the latent crises in the culture before others have fully recognized them" (180). The ensuing wars imposed upon Afghanistan and Iraq by the US in the name of "war on terrorism," for instance, have no place in DeLillo's post-9/11 fiction. Thus, DeLillo's ingenuity in "remembering the future" seems to have come to a halt since 9/11 events (DeLillo, *Body Artist* 100). DeLillo's fall and decline reaches its nadir by his 2007 novel *Falling Man* which, running counter to his usually postmodern style of writing, registers a monologic and mediatized account of 9/11 terrorism.

To the chagrin of the contemporary readers who were supposedly eager to make sense of the "traumatic" events of 9/11 through DeLillo's literary lenses, *Cosmopolis* obviously failed to meet, in Hans Robert Jauss' words, the "horizon of expectations" (224). The novel was set in 2000 and had no apparent connection to the terrorist events. This failure to win American readers' consent, however, attracted criticism on the part of both ordinary readers and intelligentsia. Oddly enough, DeLillo, in an interview with *Frankfurter Rundschau*, claimed that the novel was already finished before 9/11 and he saw "no reason to shift it to the present or to react to what had happened" (qtd. in Thurschwell 279). As Adam Thurschwell puts it, "this claim is a little difficult to believe" (279). DeLillo's insistence on having finished the novel before 9/11, rather than justify the supposedly "unrelatedness" of the novel to that day, testifies to the overwhelming pressure put upon him. Despite its surface sidestepping of 9/11, the novel, it will be argued, has largely to do with the event, though on "lower frequencies."

## **2. Review of Literature**

Joseph M. Conte in the closing chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, explores the theme of 9/11 terrorism in *Cosmopolis*. The writer is

predisposed to interpret all acts of terrorism portrayed in the novel as in one way or another related to the Islamist fundamentalism. Commenting on the episode of the anti-globalization protests, Conte maintains that "although not advocates of a transnational Islamist theocracy, the anarchists who rock Packer's limousine behave as vectors of the counternarrative" (184). He sees the whole novel, as well as 9/11 terrorism, as hinging on a struggle between the West's "technological future and the [East's] fundamentalist past" (184). Conte's view of the novel is by no means the dominant one though. In the closing chapter of his *Possibility of Fiction*, Boxall, after arguing about the notions of "cyber-capitalism" and its alleged capability of "creating future," as is registered in *Cosmopolis*, casts critical doubt on 9/11 undertones of the novel. Calling into question the obsequious readings of the novel as fitting into the dominant discourse of terrorism, Boxall raises questions about the epistemological certainty, "about the meaning and historical location of the [9/11] attacks, about whether they represent transformation or continuity" of the US foreign policy (230). He moreover suggests that "the disappearance of the towers may not signal a break in the historical continuum, but might rather turn out to be a part of it; an endorsement of the Virilian acceleration of time, a correction of it" (230). Aaron Chandler, in his "An Unsettling, Alternative Self: Benno Levin, Emmanuel Levinas, and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*," studies DeLillo's "satire on global capitalism's contradictory inclination toward both cosmopolitan worldliness and solipsism" presented in *Cosmopolis* in the light of philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Heidegger on the issues of "otherness" and "economy" (241). Reading the novel against the backdrop of 9/11, Chandler is quick to underscore the "connection [discernible] between Levin's violent retribution and the fanaticism of the al-Qaeda cell members" (258). Mary Esteve is another critic whose concise exploration of the theme of "cosmopolitanism" in American fiction can be aligned with Chandler's article. Reading *Cosmopolis*, she focuses on DeLillo's depiction of "the predatory nature of a global finance-capitalist system" epitomized in Erick Packer's egotistic treatment of others (255). Her viewpoints,

providing a theoretical backdrop for the analysis of DeLillo's ambiguous critique of American cosmopolitanism, will be further discussed later.

### **3. American Multiculturalism; Reinforced and Parodied:**

The terrorist events of 9/11, according to the contemporary American studies, had a great impact upon the dynamics of multiculturalism in the American society. It particularly revitalized the old dispute over advantages and disadvantages of multiculturalism, while "promoting national history and patriotism over diversity and tolerance" (Rubin and Verheul,7). Another disconcerting effect has to do with the homogenizing impulse of the mainstream discourses to "narrow down the debate on multiculturalism to the position of the Islamic minorities in Western countries," what is usually done in the post-9/11 fiction (Jonker, 51). Thus, generally, the very presence of Muslims and the Arabs in American society has come to be seen as a threat which, shaded by multicultural idealizations, used to be ignored. DeLillo, in *Cosmopolis*, largely relies on this discourse in his viewing American cosmopolitanism as playing a part in the emergence and the rise of global terrorism. Adopting an ambiguous position toward this discourse, DeLillo both empowers it and subverts some of its assumptions.

#### *3.1 Re-inscribing America as the Cosmopolis*

Both *Mao II* and *Falling Man*, the former prior to and the latter following 9/11, have to do a lot with the discourses of American globalization as well as the globalized America. In *Mao II*, DeLillo pays particular attention to the West's capitalist globalization as being responsible for turning people into passive consumerists of commodified realities, hence providing the Others with modern technologies which they appropriate and employ in their "vengeful" attack upon "us" (Lentricchia and McAuliffe, 29; Bull, 162; Scanlan, 30). It is maintained that the very globalization which was and still is an extension of the Western

colonialization has provided the East, or rather the Middle East, with the very modern technologies it opposes and with which it can play havoc with the West. "The virus of future," is how Karen, a character in *Mao II*, epitomizes the supposed "vulnerability" of American society towards the others' voices and counter-narratives (119). Her being mesmerized by watching the news of terror, drifting into heroic narratives and concealing behind heroic images such as Moon's and Bill's, is imaged as a very common American experience. This "defenselessness" on the part of "us" emblemized in the muted death of Bill, the novelist, is juxtaposed with the apparent barbarity of "them," Abu Rashid's terrorist group, who ironically feed on the modern technologies and even ideologies developed in the West by appropriating them through "mimic" men such as George Haddad, the ideologue of the terrorist group. This is echoed in Jean Baudrillard's interpretation of 9/11 terrorism as well. He asserts:

[...] they appropriate all the arms of dominant power. Money and financial speculation, information technologies and aeronautics, the production of spectacle and media networks: they have assimilated all of modernity and globalization, while maintaining their aim to destroy it. (19)

The fourteen year old Omar Neeley, a drug-dealer in *Mao II*, Ibrahim Hamadou, Packer's personal driver in *Cosmopolis*, and Hammad, the terrorist in *Falling Man*, are all originally from the Orient; ethnically Arab, they are American citizens. While Omar and Ibrahim take up marginal roles, Hammad turns out to be the "only possible hero" of *Falling Man*, "the person who kills and dies for faith" (157). What binds all these characters together is their seemingly entrenched place in American society. They are treated as equally as the rest of the people and have full access to all modern technologies available to American citizens. In Baudrillard's words, "they have even used the banality of American everyday life as a mask and double game. Sleeping in their suburbs, reading and studying within families, before waking up suddenly like delayed explosive

devices" (19). The omniscient narrator of *Falling Man* underscores the same "fact" in this way:

[t]he men went to Internet cafés and learned about flight schools in the United States. Nobody knocked down their door in the middle of the night and nobody stopped them in the street to turn their pockets inside out and grope their bodies for weapons. (82)

George W. Bush's immediate response to 9/11 was by and large along the same lines drawing upon and empowering the same discourse. At the very beginning of his famous speech, Bush asserted that "our way of life, our very freedom came under attack" (1). He further explained: "America [is] targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world" (1). This governmental account of 9/11 terrorism resonates through almost all the lore including fiction produced over the event thereafter. In an essay on 9/11, DeLillo relies on the same authorized proposition in his cause-and-effect-finding way of viewing the catastrophic event as a fixed reality. It was "the high gloss of our modernity" and "the thrust of our technology," DeLillo asserts, which incensed 9/11 terrorists (33). While magnifying the "fluidity" ascribed to the "boundaries" between "us" and "them" in line with the discourse of American cosmopolitanism, in *Cosmopolis* DeLillo draws on the official 9/11 narrative whereby favoring the "war on terror" rhetoric.

### ***3.1.1 Fluid Boundaries: Brutha Fez and Ibrahim Hamadou***

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The sense of permeability of American culture to immigrants' indigenous systems of values and beliefs pervades *Cosmopolis*. Two episodes in the novel dramatize this issue most clearly. The first describes the coincidental encounter between Eric and the spectacular funeral of his favorite celebrity "rapper," Brutha Fez,

apparently a man of mixed origins, whose reputation rests on his technique of "mix[ing] languages, tempos, and themes" from a wide variety of cultures (153). "[A]daptations of ancient Sufi music, rapping in Punjabi and Urdu and in the blackswagger English of the street," is what makes him a "singular" rapper in American celebrity culture (152). The narrator's description of the scene indicates Fez's profound influence on his American audience, hence inscribing him as the product of American cultural cosmopolitanism.

Eric Packer begins the story of his last day in life with setting off for a haircut across the town. Throughout this Odyssey-like, one-day-long journey, he goes through some momentous happenings such as watching the assassination of his economical rivals in Korea and Russia, losing billions of Japanese Yen, and coming across the funeral procession of his favorite singer, Brutha Fez. Interestingly, Fez' funeral coincides with the U.S. president's crossing the town. Drawing a parallel between the two, the former representing the popular and the latter the official voice, DeLillo accentuates the "fluidity" of cultural, ethnic, racial and even social borders in the American society.

Torval, Eric's chief of security, once in a while apprises him of the "state of chaos" he finds in the city – the "flood conditions in the streets ahead" (76). Before reaching the funeral ceremony, they wrongly associate the situation with the presence of the president in the city. However, they realize that it was all caused by the memorial service. Jane Melman, Eric's chief of finance, foreshadows this situational irony in the early sections of the novel. She says: "there was an entourage of limousines going down Fifth, with a motorcycle escort. I thought all these limos for the president I can understand. But it was somebody famous's funeral" (51).

Eric is deeply "disappointed" when his friend, Kozmo Thomas, discloses the news of Fez's death to him (151). Kozmo says the "funeral's been in progress all day. The family wants to give the city a chance to pay respect. The record label wants an exploitation event. Big and loud. Street to street. Right through the

night" (150). As the singer of the Cosmopolis, Fez is revealed to have been good at bringing together peoples from varying races with cross-cultural backgrounds. This ideal cosmopolitanism is most clearly illustrated in the heterogeneous populations attending the ceremony. The narrator's description of the scene bears quoting at length as it creates a carnival-like sense of the motley of races, cultures and persuasions:

[f]irst the squad of motorcycles, city police in wedge formation. Two private security vans followed, flanking a police cruiser ... Then came the flower cars, ten of them, banked with white roses rippling in the breeze. The hearse came next, an open car with Fez lying in state at the rear in a coffin angled upward to make the body visible, asphodels everywhere [...] Scores of women walked alongside the limousines, in headscarves and djellabas, hands stained with henna, and barefoot, and wailing [...] Then came the breakdancers, in pressed jeans and sneakers, here to affirm the history of the deceased ... Family and friends came next, in thirty-six white stretch limousines, three abreast, with the mayor and police commissioner in sober profile, and a dozen members of Congress, and the mothers of unarmed blacks shot by police, and fellow rappers in the middle phalanx, and there were media executives, foreign dignitaries, faces from film and TV, and mingled throughout were figures of world religion in their robes, cowls, kimonos, sandals and soutanes. (150-154)

Add to this extensive catalogue "a line of elderly Catholic nuns in full habit recit[ing] the rosary, teachers from the grade school he'd attended" and a number of "dervishes, ... lean men in tunics and long flared skirts, with topaz caps, brimless, cylindrical, tall" (155) and we get a fuller picture of this motley cultural fiesta.

The same fluidity is also emphasized in the closing chapter of the novel. This time, however, DeLillo focuses on the insinuating presence of an Oriental other, Ibrahim Hamadou, whose physical deformity accentuates his ethnic otherness. Appearing in the crucial moments of the novel, Ibrahim is revealed to be Eric's personal driver. His part of the story is limited to a few passages describing Ibrahim's appearance from Eric's point of view along with a short chit-chatting exchanged between Anthony, the barber who once had been a driver too, and Ibrahim. DeLillo's selection of an Arab character for this role is of course far from being fortuitous. He uses Ibrahim, whose Arabic name intimates a host of orientalist assumptions and associations tied with the image of fundamentalist Muslim terrorists, in order to highlight the permeability of American heterogeneous culture and "its consequent perils." The motif of insidious, menacing Muslim fundamentalism is traceable in the representation of Ibrahim:

The voice was mild. The driver was a mild figure in a suit and tie, sitting with cake in his outstretched hand, and his comments *were clearly personal*, extending beyond this city, these streets, the circumstances under discussion. (167) (emphasis added)

Or more pointedly elsewhere:

[Ibrahim] spoke quietly. There was a faint sheen of perspiration on Ibrahim's face. He looked *wary and prepared, a disposition he'd learned on some sand plain seven hundred years before he was born*. (192) (emphasis added)

"Defining the line between savagery and civilization," says Ziauddin Sardar in *American Dream, Global Nightmare*, is one of the permanent discursive functions of Orientalism (36). A Muslim, Ibrahim, in this passage, is described as having come from the medieval times. Thanks to the West's modern technologies and globalization, however, he has been able to pass over the boundaries separating his Oriental savagery from "our" civilization. Being passionate,

secretively silent, menacing and insidious are some of the cliché Orientalist motifs, here embodied in Ibrahim Hamadou. At the same time there always remains something uncanny about the Oriental identity which exhausts all the Orientalist efforts aimed at defining it. And that is why this identity remains an object of the West's gaze. In an Orientalist gesture, one could even say a Marlow-like one, Eric Packer tries hard, though in vain, to dig at the "foreign" in Ibrahim Hamadou: "[Eric] tried to read the man's ravaged eye, the bloodshot strip beneath the hooded lid. He respected the eye. There was a story there, a *brooding folklore of time and fate*" (194) (emphasis added). But "Ibrahim looked away. He would not submit to the tide of memory and emotion. Maybe he felt an allegiance to his history." (191) The "brooding" silence of the East cannot be broken, its mystery cannot be fathomed. The heart of darkness cannot be penetrated.

### *3.2 Subverting "Multicultural Idealism"*

The idea of cosmopolitanism, Amanda Anderson asserts, entails an endorsement of "reflective distance from one's cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity" (qtd. in Esteve 256). In relation to Anderson's view, Steve adds that "cosmopolitan detachment becomes central to liberalism's claims about the viability and value of abstract universalism as a foundational ethical principle" (256). DeLillo's exploration of Eric's private and public spheres demonstrates the impracticality of this idealism. Eric's treatment of "others" as his "subjects" disqualifies him, as the "master of cyber-capital," for being the lord of this Cosmopolis. "The self-totality" of Packer's worldview brings about a kind of master/slave dialectic informing all his relationships with others including Torval, his security staff, Shiner his chief of technology, Michael Chin his currency analyst, Jane Melman his chief of finance, Dr. Ingram his temporary physician, Elise Shifrin, "his wife of twenty-two days" (17), Kendra Hays, Didi Fancher, and most importantly Benno Levin, his ex-employee who ultimately avenges all the

above people, reversing the dialectic by murdering the master. The cast of characters surrounding Eric all function as commodities along with other objects such as the "white stretch limousine" to bolster his sense of security and power. This issue is evident in the following paragraph:

The limousine was a striking sight under the streetlamp, with a bruised cartoonish quality, a car in a narrative panel, it feels and speaks. The opera lights were on, twelve per side, placed between windows in sets of four. The driver stood at the rear, holding open the door. Eric did not enter immediately. He stopped and looked at the driver. He'd never done this before and it took him a while to see the man. (157)

DeLillo's telling juxtaposition of an inanimate object, the limousine, as something which "feels and speaks" with Ibrahim who is hardly seen by Eric exemplifies the dehumanizing reification of human beings implicated in the binary relationship of the master and the "wage-slave," in Marxist jargon, in the American capitalist society. Thus, Eric's cosmopolitanism appears to be all but a facade for his one-way mastery over "ideas and people" (60).

This is emphasized by Eric's symbolic blindness. For instance, when Benno Levin, his assassin who had once worked for him, asks him if he happens to "recognize" him, Eric replies: "*I can't see you clearly*" (214) (emphasis added). Eric's difficulty in seeing others, as one of the motifs of the novel, is read as betokening his egotism which is, in Esteve's words, "predicated on his conceptual mastery of world" (254). The idea of liberal multiculturalism, then, as Mary Esteve notes, is undermined by an acute sense of "narcissistic self-specularization" undergirding Eric Packer's behavior toward others (256). Or, according to Aaron Chandler, there is a "contradictory inclination toward both cosmopolitan worldliness and solipsism" discernible in Eric Packer who is introduced as a "world citizen," (241). In this reading multiculturalism fails

because the West – or the cosmopolitan capitalist West – cannot genuinely embrace it; that is, the west is, at least partly, to blame.

In our reading, however, the implication is that multiculturalism fails because the West "cannot see clearly" how dangerous its others are; that is, the others are to blame.

#### **4. Conclusion**

On the thematic level, the novel advances the idea that if Eric, "he [who] wants to be one civilization ahead of this one," could "see" the realities going on around him more "clearly," instead of "un-shielding" himself in the face of terror, he might have been able to ward off the threats lurking in his life (*Cosmopolis*, 152). Eric's parodic embracement of terrorism represented in his murdering the chief of security, "asking [Ibrahim] to cut off all means of communication with the [security] complex" (194), and most ironically, his unwittingly blowing "a hole in the middle of his [own] hand" while trying to fire at Levin, all are aimed to signify the supposedly "un-protectedness" of American society (225). The very title of Richard Gray's essay "Open Doors, Closed Minds" studying the American fiction writers' response to 9/11 hints at this discursive trend. The message is clear: the Others, non-Americans in general, find the US' unprotected doors open, dare enter it, blend in the host community, and, being close-minded, parasitically betray all the bounties, or in Edward Said's brilliant words, the "unappreciated magnanimity," it had bestowed upon them (*Culture*, 24).<sup>4</sup> Benno Levin, whose evocative name brings to mind Bin Ladin, conveys this implication most clearly in the last moments of Eric's life when, addressing Eric, he says: "you're engineering your own downfall" (216).

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth mentioning that Don DeLillo is not alone in his adopting a critical stance towards multiculturalism. It is regarded as one of the common themes of the major post-9/11 fiction such as John Updike's *Terrorist*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Martin Amis's "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" (Colgan, 121).

DeLillo's warning consequently extends to the biggest threat of the "age of terror," which is, according to the dominant discourses generated and reaccentuated pre-and post 9/11 events, "Islamic fundamentalism." Now the question remains as to whether DeLillo's novel mobilizes for a nationalist victimization of others, here distinguished as Muslims, in the name of protecting ourselves, or calls for a critical re-evaluation of the propositional tenets of the very idea of American cosmopolitanism, or probably both?

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*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Summer 2013 (6:2)

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**HOSSEIN PIRNAJMUDDIN** is an assistant professor of English Literature at University of Isfahan, Iran, where he has taught since the completion of his PhD at University of Birmingham, UK, in 2002. Mainly interested in the intersection of politics and literature, he has examined orientalist representations in the works of English writers such as Spenser, Milton and Conrad. His other interests include Renaissance literature, colonial and postcolonial theory, contemporary fiction and translation studies.

**ABBASALI BORHAN** is currently completing his PhD in English Literature at Shiraz University, Iran. His research interests include post colonialism, diaspora studies, Iranian-American literature, and contemporary fiction.