

Modernizing the National Myth: Reconfiguring American Folk Ideas in Post-9/11 Fiction

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Abstract

The American national myth, i.e., American exceptionalism, stems from the folk ideas within the American sociocultural imaginary. These ideas are interconnected, each relying on the others for their existence, and cannot be studied in isolation, as they reinforce each other retrospectively. The paper aims to update four folk ideas, namely America as a Land of Opportunity, All Men are Created Equal, God-Chosen Nation, and American Innocence, by examining their status in the selected post-9/11 fiction, i.e., Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Hamill's *Forever*. Despite efforts by writers to debunk and deconstruct them throughout American history, these folk ideas remain pervasive in cultural production. Early American writers recognized the power of these mythical folk ideas and used them during difficult times to rally support and boost the morale of the nation. This study focuses on how folk ideas appear in post-9/11 fiction, with a view to updating their relevance after the terrorist attacks. The main argument is how writers used folk ideas during the national crisis in post-9/11 fiction to support, rally, and encourage the country. The paper subscribes to the arguments of Judith Butler and Hamid Dabashi for the triangulation of the theoretical framework and uses cultural textual analysis as the methodology for analysis. The study shows that as long as the national myth is driven by exceptionalist rhetoric, it cannot be neutralized. It tends to adapt to the changing socio-cultural and geopolitical contexts, finding ways to revive itself after periods of decline.

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1. Introduction:

Modern literary history is built around a series of dynastic successions, allowing an individual to trace the evolution of literary production through its realist, modernist, or postmodernist manifestations. In such a linear view of literary history, an alteration in the successive cultural mood is attributed to a crisis in the former mood of representation. (O'Gorman, 2025) This way, events, cultural movements, and successive literary trends are intertwined. As society changes in terms of cultural mood, the existing modes of mimesis prove inadequate to represent the new structure of feelings. This shift in the mood of the culture and the subsequent shift in the modes of literary representations can be seen in the 'pre' and 'post' literary productions of a crisis. Take the event of 9/11, for example, which has far-reaching implications and consequences. Cultural critics and commentators have attributed the

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emergence of an altered global mood in representational mimesis to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. (Formby, 2011)

In the case of American literary history, the above-mentioned change can be observed, or at least the early signs of it, in the newspaper articles published by Western writers, along with the fiction they wrote. (Formby, 2011) These two forms of expression were the earliest responses that tried to make sense of the unfathomable phenomena. Richard Gray stated in his *After the Fall*: "If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd." (Gray, 2011, P.1) Cultural critics were too bewildered to articulate their thoughts on the event, partly because it defied explanation and largely because the existing modes of representation were merely unequipped to deal with the altered global mood.

On the political front, the emerging landscape was not entirely supportive of American nationalism because the American national myth, known as American exceptionalism, was already experiencing difficulties due to America's misadventure in Vietnam. However, the national myth persisted because the tragedy of 9/11 was utilized as a catalyst for the revival of American victory culture and triumphalism, which are features of American exceptionalism. In his book, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*, Trevor B. McCrisken (2003) remarks: "Belief in American exceptionalism is highly resilient, largely because it can be expressed and applied in so many different ways," and he further says that the notion and the belief of Americans in it "survived Vietnam as it had in other times of trial in American history" (P. 184). In the post-9/11 cultural and political predicament, American exceptionalism was predicated on the myth of 9/11 to provide it with the necessary discourse and logistics for revival, alongside the reinforcement and reiteration of American folk ideas in cultural production.

A look at American cultural history gives evidence of how the American national myth emerged and persisted. As a byproduct of the American sociocultural imaginary (Pease, 2009), the American national myth derives its energy from the powerhouse of folk ideas. These ideas are interconnected in such a way that one is dependent on the other for its existence and cannot be studied in isolation because these ideas strengthen each other retrospectively. (Clark, 2006) The paper tries to examine and update the status of the folk ideas in post-9/11 fiction. Folk ideas have remained pervasive in cultural production even though writers have tried to debunk and deconstruct them throughout American literary history. Folk ideas contribute to the American worldview and how Americans see themselves in the best light. (Clark, 2006) The purpose of this study is to examine the folk ideas in post-9/11 fiction, intending to update the status of folk ideas in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. The central argument of the paper is that when the nation was in a time of crisis, how the writers utilized folk ideas in post-9/11 fiction and in what ways to support, rally, and encourage the nation. It also asks the question: Can American exceptionalism be modernized? By modernizing, the researchers mean the neutralization of the American national myth in favor of a more empathetic approach to global affairs, rather than the unipolar dispensation to which America has largely resolved itself. From within post-9/11 fiction, the researchers have selected Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Pete Hamill's *Forever* for the analysis of American folk ideas.

1.1.Thesis Statement

The terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers changed the American sociocultural landscape for good—nothing was the same again. The incident of 9/11 not only created a crisis in mimetic representations but also helped revive American victory culture and triumphalism (features of American exceptionalism), which lay in jeopardy in the post-Vietnam cultural background. Alongside the myth of 9/11, American folk ideas supported the continuation of the national myth. These folk ideas are units of the American worldview and the building-blocks of American literature. By conflating these folk ideas with American exceptionalism, the paper intends to analyze the impact of 9/11 on American folk ideas in selected post-9/11 fiction, to update their status. The fiction appears to be filled with the rhetoric of reactionary politics, American victory culture, and triumphalism. As such, the discourses of victory culture and triumphalism were revived, ultimately contributing to America's exceptional character in the world.

1.2.Research Questions

- i. How do American folk ideas contribute to the formation of the American national myth?
- ii. What is the updated status of American folk ideas in the selected post-9/11 fiction?

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

For the analysis of the folk idea of America as “God-Chosen Nation”, which has its origins in the Puritanical influences at the beginning of the colonization of America, the paper relies on Hamid Dabashi (2009). The Puritanical Influences remained persistent in the unconscious of the American national identity. So much so that atheists and New Atheists could not resist the folk idea of Americans as the chosen people. New Atheists were in favor of the Christian-led war against Islamic radicalism and terrorism. Moreover, New Atheists use Orientalist arguments when it comes to the understanding of Islam (Bradley and Tate, 2010). That's why the paper uses the Post-Orientalist lens of Dabashi and views the war-mongering of believers and radicals after 9/11 as a result of the spread of Islamophobia in the West, because Dabashi equates Post-Orientalism with Islamophobia. (Dabashi, 2009) His conceptions are pertinent to the thematic analysis of the selected fiction.

Moreover, for the analysis of American exceptionalism and the folk idea of “American Innocence”, the paper subscribes to the arguments Judith Butler presented in *Precarious Life*. According to her, Straight White Man Masculinity is a hallmark of American exceptionalism, due to which physical fitness and power are desired by Americans, and it shows their love for giantism. Americans boast about their huge statues and buildings. (Butler, 2004) The same can be said about the symbolic importance of the Twin Towers to American pride and manhood. Besides other qualities, masculinity requires an American who fulfills the criteria of white man masculinity to be non-empathetic to others. This is debatable in the aftermath of 9/11, which, according to Ian McEwan, is a time of more empathetic ties with the other. (McEwan, 2001) The collapse of the Twin Towers has symbolically damaged the American white man's masculinity. The image of the falling man in Foer's novel is viewed from this perspective. American discourse about white man masculinity has encouraged, in the past, establishing white man racial identity, which gave poor white men a false sense of pride and

supremacy over African Americans without even comprehending their common plight and exploitation. The hegemony of this masculinity rhetoric depends on man's confidence in the importance of some subjective aspects of male performance, for example, physical strength, competition, impenetrable emotions or the lack of empathy, and aggression. These notions are crucial for the character analysis of Cormac O'Connor, the immortal protagonist of Hamill's *Forever*.

Furthermore, Butler's conception of mourning is also significant in analyzing the trauma of 9/11 survivors. There is an enormous political potential in open mourning and grieving because it is associated with outrage, and outrage at injustice or unbearable loss can be a threat to the disruption of hierarchy and order of political authority because a public display of open mourning would disrupt "the order and hierarchy of the soul" (Butler, 2004, P. 39), which can pose a threat to authority. Bush, as a member of the power regime, declared the end of national mourning for the losses of 9/11, which was an attempt to regulate the affect of 9/11 in favor of war. Grieving and open mourning, and our responses to them, are controlled by power regimes through explicit censorship. It is evident from this example "how affect is regulated to support both the war effort and, more specifically, nationalist belonging" (Butler, 2004, P. 40). These ideas would explain Oscar and Grandpa's working through their traumas by choosing open mourning over their losses.

The selected readings are analyzed using a qualitative approach grounded in the prescribed theoretical perspectives. Since the paper aims to analyze Post-9/11 fiction and the research questions are designed to explore descriptive and analytical methods, and because the novels are examined from a cultural perspective, Cultural Textual Analysis is used as the research methodology. Cultural Textual Analysis involves studying different cultural texts by applying textual analysis that supports the argument and the idea of the contingency of meanings. (Kovala, 2002)

3. Literature Review:

Benjamin Franklin's writing offers a literary example of the folk idea of America as a land of opportunity. He explains how someone can become part of this exceptional community through hard work, commitment, and dedication. (Clark, 2006) We see a revisit of this idea in William Dean Howells' realistic novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), where the folk idea of America as a land of opportunity is reinforced. The story follows a young, naive man's rise and fall in the business world. It's clear from the text that Lapham's downfall isn't due to some inherent flaw in the land; instead, the folk idea is upheld by showing his failure stems from an ethical choice. Therefore, the integrity of the folk idea is maintained by attributing the failure to moral and ethical concerns in the people, rather than any inherent weakness in the idea itself.

Letters from an American Farmer (1782) by St. Jean De Crevecoeur has played a major role in exerting a romanticized idea of America. The letters praise the affluence of resources that could suffice for everyone. Despite his anticipation of future problems, like corruption, too much freedom, and the violation of nature, and despite his criticism of slavery and the frontier experience, he could not prevent many British and French from immigrating to America because of his pastoral description of the land in search of a better life. And why

shouldn't he be accused of his paradoxical views, because he has spoken of "resurrection" (De Crevecoeur, 2007, P. 28) in the third letter, "What is an American?"

However, there are those who do not conform to the idea of America as a land of opportunity and also the canonical standards of writing of the time. Ralph Ellison shattered the notion in *The Invisible Man* by writing against it. Ellison's protagonist is an intelligent, dedicated, and hardworking young man, but not granted any opportunity. In his recommendation letter there is this statement: "Keep this nigger running," (qtd. in Clark, 2006, P. 18), which deprives him of any chance of actualizing his dream, only because of his race.

The concept of the folk idea "All Men are Created Equal" is an essential part of American national identity. Robin M. Williams states in *The Character of Americans*: "The avowal of 'equality', and often its practice as well, has been a persistent theme through most of American history. Even modern economic organizations, which in many ways epitomize inequality, have stressed 'equality of opportunity.'" Yet few other value complexes are more subject to strain in modern times (Williams, 1970, P. 191). This folk idea was first established by the forefathers of the American nation. Even though the founders did not include women and citizens of color, it spread through the early Federalist writings. Although the disenfranchised in the 19th century questioned it, they too worked within the confines of the idea. Some writers like Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth are in favor of equality, but they consider it only applicable to men.

The idea of equal opportunity and that 'all men are created equal' has later been cast into what James Truslow Adams first called the "American Dream" in *The Epic of America*. Adams defines it as:

...that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. ... It has been a dream of being able to grow to the fullest development as man and woman.... (Adams, 2001, P. 404)

The definition itself bears references to the exceptional character of the American people. Moreover, his dream was primarily focused on equal opportunity and was free from the limiting effect of class restrictions that guarantee upward mobility, with an overarching theme of cultural investment in equality. For the disenfranchised and less-franchised of American society and those on the margins, reality has been very different, lagging behind the ideals of the American Dream. As far as the idea is concerned, it, too, in the post-World War II era, became entangled with consumer capitalism. In this period, attaining social status and economic security, and of course, the fear of losing these, became the central tenets of the American Dream. (Clark, 2006)

Another folk idea, "God-Blessed Nation," is also an integral part of American identity. Lee Coleman, in his chapter entitled "What is American?" writes that religion is not of much importance in American life. He says: "It is claimed by some that our religion, however conspicuous it may be in national life, is chiefly a 'Sunday religion,' which can be conveniently

forgotten during the business week [...]” (Coleman, 1964, P. 24). Against these alleged traits stand the evidence presented by other observers to show the great influence of religion in American national life— especially the intermingling of religious issues in political and economic life, the importance of church membership in individual success, the large element of religious motivation in American history, its evangelism, and the fervor and vividness of religious emotion. (Coleman, 1964)

The early American literature of the colonial period, of the Puritan origins, and the writings of the founding fathers of the nation are replete with the folk idea of “God Blessed Nation” and the religious sentiments attached to it. In the 19th century, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville explored this idea with the repressive Puritanism of *The Scarlet Letter* and the all-encompassing “Presbyterianism” of *Moby-Dick*. It has been challenged and questioned by many writers from all ethnic groups in the pre- and post-Civil War periods. The twentieth century saw a break away from this folk idea; not just the conception of a nation but also the status of god, and if there is one, was questioned. The idea of “whose God” was prominent in the literature of the 20th century. (Thoman, 2002) Zora Neale Hurston contemplates the chasm between different ethnic groups in America and questions whether America could be united in a true sense. (Hurston, 1997)

American innocence is another pervasive folk idea, but it is often hard to recognize and locate it in literary productions. Among the several forms of this idea is the belief of Americans as prelapsarian Adams and the notion of Americans as righteously pure. The early American texts can be quoted as examples that claim that Americans had the right to settle in the new land, force others into slavery, and extort their lands and goods. All these acts were legitimized because America would be “a city on the hill”. (Clark, 2006, P. 22) Nineteenth-century works such as *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, *The Marble Faun*, and *Daisy Miller* reexamine American innocence. Twentieth-century writers question this folk idea in *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The folk idea of American innocence is still relevant and is a decisive force in the formation of American national identity. Americans use it to rationalize their unilateral behavior in the modern world; they take shelter behind it and invoke it for political maneuvers.

Being part of the American socio-cultural imaginary, the folk ideas reviewed above can rightly be termed as the powerhouse of American national myths, including American exceptionalism, from where they derive their energy. The term “American exceptionalism”, although coined in the 20th century, has a historical premise. Actually, it has Marxist origins when Joseph Stalin coined it in an ironic accusation of the Lovestoneite faction of the American Communist Party of heresy for deviating from the Party's orthodoxies. The American scholars rightly invested in the theorization of the term and traced its roots to the American folk idea of “Manifest Destiny”, a notion that allowed the US to align with God’s intentions, maintain power for the progress and well-being of the world. Through such genealogy, they turned the ironical statement into a field of inquiry and scholarship. The first rehearsal of this Manifest Destiny allowed the genocidal usurpation of goods and land from the natives. This established a connection between virtue and state-sponsored violence, disguised within the superiority narrative of straight white masculinity. This illicit relationship

has rarely been challenged in the American nationalist discourse. (Clark, 2006, P. 26) To this term, many political and moral meanings have been associated, among which is the notion of American uniqueness because of its founding premise of individual liberty. It has a divine side as well that allows power to be conflated with virtue, which means that America is powerful because it is good.

Mark Liberman states that American exceptionalism requires of an American to play his part in reinforcing and asserting America's special character and role in the world. The phrase offered a certain irony, looking at the frequent use of the term for justifying American actions during the Cold War against the influence of the USSR. But the spirit and the origin of the notion reach far back in history, when John Winthrop compared the New World to a "shining city on a hill"—relying upon biblical analogies and underlying the accomplishments of the settlers with God's will. (Liberman, 2006) However, besides the early traces of the notion and its status during the Cold War, there is another identification of it in the post-World War II period. During this period, Americans were identified as the possessors of special gifts and characteristics that they ought to employ through their decisions and actions globally. After taking such exceptions, American society has often grappled with the repercussions of the often not-so-exceptional decisions and actions with regard to the American psyche and international relations (Nayak and Malone, 2009). 9/11 is another chapter in American political and cultural history, so it is crucial to know the status of the idea in the post-9/11 American fiction.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Scholars commonly argue in their critical readings of post-9/11 fiction that these works are essentially part of a mainstream effort to maintain white, phallogocentric narratives of victory culture and domesticity in the aftermath of the attacks (Vanderwees, 2014). After the terrorist attacks, the American government wanted to win the sympathies of the world by retaliating with reactionary politics in Afghanistan and Iraq, so it triggered the triumphalist and white-man masculinity rhetoric in a wave of uncritical nationalism and patriotism. But the post-9/11 fiction also shows the traumatic effects of the attacks on American straight white-man masculinity by showing its vulnerability. This vulnerability was considered fatal for national unity at the time of war, which is why mainstream discourses buried such discussions under the myth of 9/11.

In order to understand the mythic icon of the "self-made" masculine man, it is necessary first to understand Roland Barthes' description of the function of myth when he says: "[the] function of myths is to distort" (Barthes, 1993, P. 121) and, in doing so, "transform history into nature" (Barthes, 1993, P. 129). The myth of 9/11 disconnects the event from its immediate history and was considered by many a rupture from it. However, Foer's work is different from many texts related to 9/11 in its treatment of trauma. It complicates the trauma by linking it to other past events. It links the dots of historical events by exposing the not-so-exceptional actions of America in Hiroshima and Dresden. America was directly responsible for the two horrific acts of violence in human history. Foer's narrative technique draws parallels between the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Dresden Bombing, and the Hiroshima Bombing. It was a reminder to America that the horrific acts of violence of the past have

turned back on it as Karma. The folk idea of American Innocence has also been addressed, as the novel reminds America of the excesses of exceptions it has taken in the past. The horrific acts of violence it has committed in Dresden and Hiroshima have artistically been linked with the event of 9/11.

Oscar's grandparents are the survivors of the Dresden bombing; their depiction of trauma runs parallel to the violence and trauma associated with 9/11 attacks. The Hiroshima incident is depicted paratextually through a survivor's interview on TV, as it could not be part of any of the three narrators' experiences. This is a backlash against the US policy of disconnecting 9/11 from its historical background. The event was treated as an independent, isolated phenomenon, entirely disconnected from its immediate past, because it was considered something fresh—the starting point of a new era. Georgiana Banita notes that the 9/11 terrorist attacks have been presented as a complete rupture from the past. She asserts: "Global historical events that may have prefaced or prefigured the terrorist attacks were quickly forgotten in post-9/11 cultural discourse, while a vociferous counter-discourse emerged around how 9/11 ushered in, seemingly out of the blue, a new transnational era" (Banita, 2012, P. 44). To cover the traumatic wounds and vulnerability exposed by the terrorist attacks, it was a deliberate strategy—as per the demand of American exceptionalism—to untether the event from its historical context and foreclose real understanding of it. However, Foer has tried to reconnect the event to its historical roots.

Oscar's case of mourning is similar to that of his grandparents, who were also not given a proper opportunity to mourn their losses. Throughout their lives, they had been grappling with the repercussions of trauma. After the occurrence of 9/11, Grandpa was looking up the names of the victims, and one day he saw his son's name; "Thomas Schill, [his] first thought was that [he] had died" (Foer, 2005, P. 273). Contrary to his coping with the losses in Dresden, Grandpa resolved to properly mourn this loss. When he came back to America, the immigration officer asked him the purpose of his visit. "I wrote in my daybook, 'To mourn,' and then crossed out the 'mourn' and wrote, 'To ³ try to live'" (Foer, 2005, P. 268). In open mourning, there is a chance of closing the traumatic wounds of the survivors and fighting with survivor's guilt. The realization that mourning can help overcome the trauma associated with the tragic loss of loved ones dawned upon Oscar in the last part of the novel. He thinks: "Maybe it is true that you can use up all of your tears, maybe grandma is right about that" (Foer, 2005, P. 290). This realization has been a crucial step in Oscar's journey towards a willful closure of the traumatic event.

Furthermore, after 9/11, guided by the rhetoric of American victory culture and triumphalism, America resolved itself to a first-person take on global affairs. This unipolar dispensation of world affairs was a sign of the revival of the national myth. However, the novel challenges America's first-person stance by introducing three narrators. The initial response of America to the post-9/11 cultural and political predicament was an assertion of

³ The eraser is part of the text.

US leadership and unilateralism. The US had to shore up the first-person point of view, and thus, according to Butler, “a narrative form emerges to compensate for the enormous narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability” (Butler, 2004, P. 7). So, contrary to the claims of critics after 9/11 that it was now a time of more empathetic ties with the other, US policies continued with the unreason of unilateralism and a first-person take on global affairs. However, Foer complicates the first-person narration by incorporating multiple narrators. The multiple viewpoints on the same incidents give the novel its aura of authenticity and, as such, move it away from the first-person narrative strategy of the US to which it had confined itself in the post-9/11 situation.

On the one hand, the narrative form of the novel moves away from the unilateral-first-person narrative strategy of the US after 9/11, but on the other hand, the oscillation of the us-and-them binary seems intact in the novel. Mr. Black’s one-word biographical index has an entry for everyone he knew or happened to read about. It even had an entry for Mohammad Atta, which read “War”. (Foer, 2005, P. 159) It was he who had piloted the plane that hit the North Tower. Just like Cormac (the protagonist of *Forever*), Oscar also imagines the last few seconds before the plane hits the tower, but their perspectives are different. Cormac tries to have an empathetic connection with the terrorists for a brief time, while Oscar’s perspective is driven by hatred:

I imagined the last second, when I would see the pilot’s face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined each other looking in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building.
I hate you, my eyes would tell him.
I hate you his eyes would tell me. (Foer, 2005, P. 244)

The difference between his and Cormac’s description of the terrorist in Pete Hamill’s *Forever* is very vivid. Cormac was able to have an empathetic understanding of the terrorist for a little while. However, Oscar’s hatred is in line with the US policies after the attacks, even though it was considered a time of more empathetic ties with the other.

Cormac records the comments of the people and media about the attackers of 9/11, for example: “They say, it’s crazy Arabs”, and the attackers are called “Islamic terrorists” (Hamill 588), but here he seems to be abstaining from passing any judgmental comments. He tries to imagine the mental situation of the hijackers and the last few seconds of their lives.

He tries to imagine those final seconds, tries to imagine himself at the controls as he soars toward the tower at six hundred miles an hour, tries to imagine himself shouting ‘*Allah Akhbar*’, and understands that the moment of obliteration might also have been a moment of consuming ecstasy. (Hamill, 2003, P. 588)

This is a more complex view than the one presented in mainstream media. He empathizes with the attackers and tries to imagine himself in their shoes.

However, this empathy lasts only briefly. Once he realizes that Delfina may have been in the building, it turns into aggression and hatred, and he voices his anger about the terrorists in the following words: “Each heading here to kill thousands and find paradise. Heading for Delfina, and all those they did not know” (Hamill, 2003, P. 590). Yet Cormac is hardly in a moral position to judge them, since he was also trying to enter the Otherworld. In a fit of anger and helplessness, he adds: “You lousy fuckers” (Hamill, 2003, P. 590). Such remarks frustrate readers’ expectations of an emerging empathetic relation with the other. The argument made earlier, therefore, still holds: contrary to critics’ claims that post-9/11 represents a time of greater empathy with the other, US exceptionalist policies fail to produce a genuine empathetic understanding.

As a vigilante, Cormac would not hesitate to kill many when it’s a question of New York, of which he thinks himself a custodian. The question is whether he is in a moral position to judge the actions of people like himself. Further, the sense of empathy required after 9/11 is missing in the neoconservative mode of American exceptionalism, as there is a lack of dialogue with the other. Hence, it is pertinent to ask whether American exceptionalism “can acquire through external experience [a] sense of relativity” (Hartz, 1995, P. 24) or “a new level of consciousness ... in which an understanding of self and an understanding of others go hand in hand” (Hartz, 1995, P. 308). Hartz’s caution at the outset of the Cold War is still relevant, and America needs to overcome the limits of the post-9/11 binary forms of self and other that stem from American exceptionalism to tackle the issue related to this dichotomy in a different manner. The rise of an uncritical wave of patriotism and militant nationalism proved to be blowback to national policies, at home and abroad, and eventually, it gave rise to xenophobia and Islamophobia at this juncture of hegemonic transition.

In *Forever*, there is use of the stereotypical images of Muslims in a very unconscious manner; images that were already prevalent in the print and electronic media. While describing the photo of Elizabeth printed in major newspapers and tabloids of the city, after the disappearance of her husband in the World Trade Center incident, Cormac says that her face was covered “as if wearing a *burqa*” (Hamill, 2003, P. 591). In another place, he termed the attackers “Islamic terrorists” (Hamill, 2003, P. 592). Whether conscious or unconscious, the stereotypical images of Arabs, Muslims, and Islam have been a permanent feature of post-9/11 fiction, which is another challenge to the oscillation of boundaries between the us and them and a real obstacle in achieving the kind of empathetic ties idealized in the post-9/11 situation. Moreover, representation of other religions can also be seen in the pre-9/11 period. There is a detailed discussion between Cormac and Delfina over the difference between monotheism and polytheism. They thought that “monotheism has led to so many slaughters,” and Cormac wonders out loud why the “single God is always so cruel” (Hamill, 2003, P. 508). Delfina answers in the following words:

Because he wants love, man,” she says, “and he can’t get it. Look at all the commandments. They all say, Love me or die. What a weird message! God insists that you love him. He says, if you don’t love me, I’ll punish you with boils and plagues and locusts. I will burn you

in Hell. His vanity is endless. Love me, he says, love me, love me, love me. He is supposed to be the most powerful dude in the universe, El Senor, the Father of us all, and he comes across as a huge pain in the ass. (Hamill 508)

These are her serious thoughts about monotheism. She further says: "Hey, why can't he be indifferent? ...Why does he give such a big rat's ass about getting people to love him? He's like some kind of rapper. You know, Love me, baby, or I'll throw you under the truck." (Hamill, 2003, P. 508). This is a problematic description of monotheistic religions and God. The blasphemous description continues when Delphina compares monotheism with polytheism; she says: "I mean the real gods are not so jealous, man, not so vain.... They have weaknesses, like everybody else" (Hamill 508). Finding faults in monotheism, here it connotes Islam, had become a common preoccupation not just of the polytheistic religions, but those who do not believe in any God(s) also participated in the tirade of polemics.

However, religion has been a defining factor in establishing American national identity, especially the folk idea that Americans are the chosen people resonates in the American cultural production of every age. This folk idea guides the ideological spectrum of their worldview because it has its origins in the Puritanical influences at the beginning of colonization on American soil. The Puritanical influences remained persistent in the unconscious of the American national identity. So much so that even new atheists could not resist the idea. They were in favor of the Christian-led war against Islamic radicalism and terrorism. Moreover, New Atheists use Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist arguments when it comes to the understanding of Islam. For example, when an authority on the iniquities of Islam is required, eminent Neo-Orientalists like Bernard Lewis and Paul Berman are consulted (Bradley and Tate, 2010). The consensus of believers and non-believers over the stereotyping of Islam and Muslims has been rightly called post-orientalism by Dabashi (2009). In his argument, Dabashi has equated Islamophobia with post-orientalism.

In the post-orientalist era, the stereotyping remained consistent with orientalism, which resulted a hike in hate crimes against Muslims after 9/11. Even before 9/11, stereotyping could be seen as part of the American day-to-day socializing conversation. Thinking about Healey's success as a dramatist, Cormac wonders what he would do with the immense fortune that he might get in the future and puts the question to him. Healey replies: "Maybe I'll move to Kabul and watch the Taliban shoot statues!" (Hamill, 2003, P. 511). This statement refers to the event during the Taliban era of bombing the statue of Buddha in Bamiyan.

The disillusionment of the disenfranchised has also been hinted at in *Forever*. Cormac visualizes his Negro friends who fought alongside Washington for the cause of "liberty that Washington did not deliver" (Hamill, 2003, P. 597). The hopes of the Africans were soon shattered when they did not get the liberty they were promised. But they were too young, too naïve "to know that most great hopes end with a broken heart" (Hamill, 2003, P. 597). These instances clearly indicate the predicament of the African Americans who are still struggling for their political and social rights. For him, liberty is a dream that is yet to be achieved, and

his views are in line with the prophetic version of American exceptionalism, according to which the great ideals of American exceptionalism are yet to be achieved. Moreover, the folk idea that “Every Man is Created Equal” has been updated in the sense that the disenfranchised still await to be included in the folds of equality. Viewing this from the historical perspective of Native Americans, African Americans, and all other disenfranchised people dominated by the white ‘empire’, the paradox of exceptionalism is evident.

As far as the idea of the Promised Land is concerned, it has been linked with other mythologies in *Forever*. *The New Yorker* has reviewed the novel as an “entertaining panhistorical fantasy” and as a “paean to New York’s immortality” (qtd. in Hamill, 2003, P. i). New York is immortal, and so is Cormac as long as he remains within the confines of the island. The immortality of New York endorses the idea of America as an earthly paradise, the Promised Land; a land where one person has reached the zenith of the criteria of masculinity set by the American White Man Masculinity rhetoric. According to the prophetic version of exceptionalism, the greatness of character envisioned for an American white masculine man and the exceptional status of character he must have are over the horizon and are yet to be achieved. But Cormac becomes that single role model who meets the criteria of a true white masculine man, even though the criteria against which men are measured in this rhetoric are always already unattainable. The question that arises here is how Cormac succeeded in attaining the unattainable. The answer is that it may be unattainable in an ordinary lifespan, but Cormac’s case is different. His immortal status and his long life enabled him to attain this entitlement. Moreover, it is also significant that some Americans can meet the criteria because if it were something impossible to achieve, then people would stop trying. Realistically, the cultural producers need to show the masses a few exceptional role models that will make them trust the process because it is the process of becoming, and not the acquisition of the goal, that makes the notion linger in the American socio-cultural imaginary.

Cormac’s mother narrates to him the story of Abraham, who took his people out of their endless wandering and tent lives in the desert and “brought them at last to the land of milk and honey, to Israel” (Hamill, 2003, P. 18). Similarly, *Tir-na-Nog* is the name given to the “otherworld” in Irish mythology, and it has an analogical reference to the Judeo-Christian myth of paradise—the Promised Land. He believed in the Irish mythology of the Otherworld, and throughout his life, he had waited to enter the Otherworld after fulfilling his sacred duty of avenging his father’s murder. But when he got an opportunity to kill Warren, he decided not to, and by doing so, he forsook the idea of the heavenly paradise. He preferred the earthly paradise over the Otherworld. In fact, the earthly paradise suits his case as eternity and immortality are at his disposal. Even the cave “(t)he place where he will find the entrance to the Otherworld” (Hamill 601), where he could surrender the immortal status of his life, is located on Manhattan Island. “His hidden *shee* in the American earth” (Hamill, 2003, P. 601). All of these endorse the idea of America as an earthly paradise.

However, the folk idea does not remain the same throughout the course of the novel. Cormac talks of New York as an image of the ruined paradise even in the pre-9/11 period (Hamill, 2003, P. 424), but the sense of the ruined paradise was much alleviated after the fall of the Twin Towers. The updated status of the folk idea of the Promised Land and the

associated notion of the earthly paradise is that it has been turned into ruins. Americans have become nostalgic about pre-9/11 New York. This is the first time that the paradise imagery has been disrupted, and the reason behind it is that the paradise is not safe anymore. Terrorists had been able to ignite the fire of hell at the very heart of this earthly paradise. That is why we see a disruption of the Paradise imagery in the post-9/11 cultural production.

In the past, New York's healing powers had made it possible to recover from major catastrophic events and disasters in a short time, for example, the Great Fire. Still, the collapse of the Twin Towers was an irreparable loss, according to Cormac. He tries to remember the Great Fire and how seven hundred houses were destroyed, but were replaced a year later. He weighs the disasters of the past in terms of recovery and says: "This is disaster nostalgia...a new category among all New York nostalgias" (Hamill, 2003, P. 589). As New York is a synecdoche for America in the novel, it means America will never recover from this wound. Because an unbearable vulnerability has been exposed—a narcissistic wound about which Freud (1963) says that losses associated with failure often leave behind an injury, a "narcissistic scar" (291). The failure of American exceptionalism was an unbearable loss, and America had to shore it up. So, instead of making 9/11 into a site of reflection over the shared precarity of humanity, or instead of turning it into a moral and ethical consideration for the vulnerability of others, America reacted with reactionary politics and turned the exposure of vulnerability into a cry for rectification, further violence and war.

5. Conclusion:

The reviewed literature shows that the sociocultural imaginary serves as the source of American national myths, which continually emerge from it and reinforce exceptionalist discourse. Over time, the American national myth has gone through several stages of development, with folk ideas helping it endure. Yet certain patterns remain visible across these stages. In each phase, America has defined itself against an enemy and a mission to confront that enemy, revealing the adaptive nature of American exceptionalism. As a result, the presence of an enemy and the threat it poses remain central to American mythopoeia, making it difficult to modernize exceptionalism. The analysis suggests that as long as the national myth continues to rely on exceptionalist rhetoric, it cannot be neutralized; instead, it adapts to the shifting sociocultural and geopolitical conditions and finds ways to revive itself after periods of decline.

The analysis has sufficiently illustrated that in the development and perpetuation of the folk idea of America as "God-Chosen People" who were selected for the creation of "The City on the Hill", all (believers, radicals, liberals, atheists, and new-atheists) have contributed their share. Apart from the believers, radicals like New Atheists have shown hatred of Islam as staunch opponents. They openly support the Christian Crusade against Muslims in the war against terror. Such sentiments have resonated time and again in the fiction under discussion. Hamid Dabashi's notions of Post-Orientalism and Islamophobia have been handy for their analysis. The myth of the earthly paradise also resurfaced as a corresponding myth to the folk idea of the "God-chosen people". But after the occurrence of 9/11, there is a disruption of the imagery of the earthly paradise, and the novel conveys the message that America will never

heal from the wounds of the attack, which is why there is a strong nostalgic feeling to return to the past.

Moreover, the first-person narration used in much post-9/11 fiction aligns with the US strategy of unilateralism. America's turn toward unilateralism was a deliberate political and cultural response shaped by the demands of exceptionalism. Yet the apparent crisis of the subject in the post-9/11 cultural and political landscape, along with efforts to reinforce the first-person narrative after the vulnerabilities of exceptionalism were exposed, stands in contrast to claims that the period demanded more empathetic ties with the other. Thus, contrary to critics' arguments that post-9/11 marked a turn toward greater empathy, US policy continued to operate through unilateralism and a first-person view of global affairs. The paper therefore points to the need for a post-orientalist study of American Orientalism and American exceptionalism in tandem, as such an approach can deepen our understanding of the American national myth.

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Author(s)' Contribution

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