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**Postmodern Orientalized Terrorism:  
Don DeLillo's *The Names***

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**Abstract**

The terrorism of obscurantism is one of the hallmarks of Don DeLillo's *The Names* (1982), distinguishing it as one of the "difficult writings" in his canon. Terrorism, however, is not confined to the novel's poetics of writing, it constitutes, as the arch-motif of the novel, its politics as well. Relying on the Orientalist bulk of knowledge about the Orient, DeLillo, in this novel, inaugurates a Neo-orientalist trend in American postmodern fiction: generalizing the images of "Arab" terrorists to Iranians, paving the way for further Orientalist (mis)representations in future American fictions. DeLillo's narrative, however, is by no means all-inclusive; rather, it is marked with some discursive gaps which destabilize the novel's political claims on the "truth" of *the* terrorism under discussion. In this paper, first, through an intertextual reading, the novel's ambiguous re-enactment of and departure from Orientalist discourse is explored, and then, it is argued that by making Iranians the objects of Orientalist representation, the writer expands the horizons of the discourse of terrorism. Besides, DeLillo's anti-totalizing totalizational gesture in both undermining the Orientalist discourse and at the same time legitimizing it —what makes the novel thematically, or precisely saying politically, postmodern— is brought to light.

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### 1. Introduction

Critical consensus ranks Don DeLillo as one of the most prominent contemporary writers of American postmodern fiction. Most notably, Harold Bloom (2003, p.1) regards him as one of the four "major American novelists now at work" together with Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy. DeLillo's persistent preoccupation with the notion of terrorism in its diverse forms such as local, mass media, cyber-terrorism, left-wing, anti-globalization, state-sponsored and also Islamic fundamentalist terrorism has won him the epithet of "father of postmodern photogenic terror" (Leppard, 2007, p.21). His early phase of writings, including *End Zone* (1972) and *The Players* (1977), concerns the local acts of terrorism in American society mainly deemed as domestic anarchical behavior. With *The Names* (1982) marking a new phase in his career, his exploration of the discourse of terrorism gains a broader scale to include international events taking place outside American borders (though in one way or another in direct connection with American foreign policies). Inflected by the dominating discourses of the time, *The Names* ostensibly has recourse to Orientalist discourse in its (indirect) investigation of non-discursive events such as Iran's Islamic Revolution and its aftermath Hostage Crisis, predominantly filtered through power-willed mediatized narratives. What DeLillo offers in this novel is not simply a presentation of the "authorized" accounts of the "foreign" events as did Western mass media. This is because he seems to be mindful of, and more open to the inevitably contingent multidimensionality inherent in the reality(-ies) underlying all such events. To put it more precisely, being conscious of the "constructedness" of all accounts of reality, DeLillo tries to keep a degree of "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p.xxiv) informing all ideological representations of terrorism. This desire, nevertheless, is not fulfilled, for he ultimately falls prey to the same totalizations which

he seemingly sets to critique. More pointedly, he legitimizes, as much as subverts, the very narratives that seek an Orientalization of the concept of terrorism. Thus, DeLillo's gesture of the exposé of the discourse of Orientalism as an unreliable source of knowledge about the orient paradoxically turns into a re-inscription of the same Orientalist codes. In what follows, this ambiguous position vis-à-vis the discourse of Orientalism is studied in an attempt to see how *The Names*, as one of the early examples of "American terrorist novel"<sup>1</sup> in Benjamin Kunkel's (2005) words, ultimately complies with the dominant discourses of the society in which it is produced.

## 2. Review of Literature

Many scholars have argued about the impact upon *The Names* of the Derridian notion of "Différance" (1968, p.129) and the resultant poststructuralist stance toward language as not the medium through which Being shines, but as the very reality itself embedded in the endless "free play" of signifiers. In this regard, "the problematic link between signifier and signified," David Cowart (2002, p. 162) notes, is one of the central preoccupations of the novel. This issue is undoubtedly one of the main concerns addressed in the story, however, it would be too narrow an approach to consider it as only the "marks-on-blanks" (Abrams, 1977, p.245), disregarding the affiliative network and the pragmatic aspects of the novel.

The novel, Christopher Donovan (2005) notes, has two endings: the first is James' ending which terminates the plot narrative of the novel. And, the other is that of Tap, James' son (p. 54). What distinguishes Tap's short story from that of James, in terms of language, is his playful use of words and deliberate disfiguration of some grammatical rules. In this sense, Tap seems to be fashioning a Cummingsian approach to language whereby he can convey his feelings undisturbed by linguistic conventions. In line with this idea, Paula Bryant (1987, p. 19) views the final ending as "an exuberant, unsettling demonstration of the potential for human freedom inherent in the deliberate disordering and recreation

of the language".<sup>2</sup> Regarding the connection between the initial letters of the victims' names of the murder cult with that of the places in which they are assassinated, Bryant (1987, p. 19) observes that "[t]hrough a terminal act of connection," the cultists "attempt the binding of symbol and object into one-to-one correspondence". Thus, he makes the conclusion that DeLillo does not pay obeisance to the poststructuralist notion of the "free play" of signification, hence making an effort to bring the signifier and the signified together. It is worthy of note that the same trend can be traced in DeLillo's approach to terrorism represented as a "foreign" phenomenon with Oriental roots.

Drawing on Tap's "non-fiction fiction" and his "childish spelling mistakes," Stephanie S. Halldorson (2007, p.24) also stresses the experimentalist features of the novel. She asserts that DeLillo, in this novel, "comes up against language itself"—the idea that language is "both arbitrary and consistent" (p. 24). According to Halldorson (2007), the novel is above all concerned with the question of possibility of communication, or in Derridian terms, the notion of "différance" according to which meaning can never be fully present since it is always deferred. "Does one know what he means to write despite the mistakes; or, does he in fact write what he really means?," Halldorson (2007, p.25) poses as the main contention of the novel. "Language as ritual", Bruce Bawer (1985) similarly observes, rather than "a means of communicating sophisticated ideas and complicated feelings" is DeLillo's "philosophy" in the novels such as *The Names* (p. 27). The arbitrariness of language as the final arbiter of meaning is well illustrated in James' unsuccessful dialogue with Niko, the Greek concierge. Pondering over the overwhelming power of "words" in conveying what he intends to mean, James wonders if "reality [could be] phonetic" (*Names*, p.103). Dennis A. Foster's (1991) "Alphabetic Pleasures: *The Names*" and Matthew J. Morris's (1989) "Murdering Words: Language and Action in Don DeLillo's *The Names*" share a similar critical viewpoint toward the novel. John H. Duvall (2008), also, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, views the novel as being about "language

and the possibility of meaning" (p. 6). Though this kind of criticism helps us to have a better understanding of the linguistic experimentation of the work, it ultimately reduces the novel to an abstract study of language.

Despite mainly focusing on DeLillo's use of language, Peter Boxall (2006), in passing, points to the postcolonial undertones of the novel. He notes that "the involvement of Maitland, Axton and others in the political and economic balance of these new 'people's republics' [such as Iran] — and of the post-war geopolitical map more generally— is to ensure that the postcolonial world is organized in accordance with [the] US interests" (Boxall, 2006, p.89). His apt comment, though made in passing, is profoundly revealing for it touches on one of the most significant aspects of the novel, the one which goes beyond the text itself. Boxall (2006) makes a thematic comparison between the novel's linguistic concerns with that of post-Cold War world ruled by one superpower, the USA. According to Boxall (2006), DeLillo is tacitly hinting at the self-referentiality of such a world which the "USA has made into a self for itself, the image that the USA sees in the 'funhouse mirror' of a colonizing, usurping love" (p. 107). More pointedly, Boxall (2006) deems CIA presence in the Middle East as a kind of narcissistic desire on the part of the USA to both build up and maintain its desirable international identity in these regions. Interestingly, this desire is split as much as the connection between words and actions is. The very title of the novel also signals a similar message as it implies the desire on the part of the author to preserve the referentiality of language. "The Names," the very title of the novel, generally refers to the name of the group of the murder cultists who similarly try to match the names of the victims with those of the places in which they are assassinated. This effort can be attributed as well, Boxall (2006) observes, to the USA, in general, which is after "establishment of an absolute and inescapable self-reference" (p. 107). Again, the same exertion can be detected in DeLillo's representation of terrorism as an "Orientalized" reality.

With a keen understanding of the direct references made to the historical events, such as Iran's Islamic Revolution and the subsequent

Hostage Crisis, Anne Longmuir (2005) studies the novel from a much more relevant perspective. Considering Hostage Crisis as the historical backdrop for "the novel's action and the philosophical meditations," Longmuir (2005, p.107) puts emphasis on the intertextual relationship between this event and the cult murder as both being symbolic. Longmuir's (2005) viewpoints will be discussed later in more detail. Nessim John Watson (2005), also, in her study of the images of "Arabs" as terrorists in American movies, provides ample evidence of the ideologically charged representations of the Oriental in the American popular culture.

### 3. Discussion

As is usual with almost all DeLillo's novels, the theme of terror plays a pivotal role in *The Names*. What distinguishes this novel from the preceding works is its addressing of terrorism at an international scale and, notably, outside American borders. Another important aspect of the novel is its identification of terrorism with the Orient through Orientalist discourse. Thus, it comes as no surprise that DeLillo has characterized this novel as a turning point in his career, "mark[ing] the beginning of a new dedication" (cited in Cowart, 2008, p.163).

Edward Said (2003) has written that "every writer on the Orient assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies" (p. 20). With Iran's revolution and its aftermath Hostage Crisis, the question of representation of Iranians came to the fore. The previous knowledge of the Orient however did not distinguish between different Muslim nations in the Orient. As such, relying on the Orientalist bulk of knowledge, Western writers represented Iranians not as Persians, but mostly as Arabs. DeLillo also draws on the narratives, images, and motifs which were once used for Arabs in his representation of Iranians. And this is exactly the reason why "At the height of the Iranian hostage crisis," as Jack G. Shaheen (2001) remarks, "70 percent of Americans wrongly identified Iran as an Arab country" (cited in Watson, 2005, p.96).

In her analysis of Arab Action Movies in America, Nessim Watson (2005) observes that "the events of 1979-1981 mark a turning point in popular discourses of American Orientalism" (p. 95). Drawing upon previous representation of Arabs as "terrorists stemming from the 1967 and 1973 wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors" (p. 96), the American media similarly applied the discourse of terrorism to Iranians already identified with Arabs. With his *The Names*, DeLillo becomes one of the early, if not the first, American novelists to forge an Arab-terrorist identity for Iranians in American fiction subsuming their distinct reality and as such, suppressing their different voice. The same point could be made about the American popular fiction of the last three decades until now. James Clavell's (1987) *Whirlwind*<sup>3</sup>, John D. Randall's (1988) *The Jihad Ultimatum*, Elaine Sciolino's (2001) *Persian Mirrors*, Joel C. Rosenberg's (2005) *The Ezekiel Option*, Christopher Bram's (2006) *Exiles in America*, Tom Gabbay's (2009) *The Tehran Conviction*, Stephen Coonts' (2009) *The Disciple*, David Ignatius' (2009) *The Increment*, and Dale Brown's majority of post-9/11 novels such as *Satan's Tail* (2005), *Retribution* (2007), *Shadows of Steel* (2008), and *Shadow Command* (2009), all adopt a similar position toward Iranians representing them through the lenses of Orientalist discourse.

The Orient, as is represented in the Orientalist texts, Said (2003) contends, is but "a textual construct" (p. 53). It means that the underlying "structure of attitude and reference" (Said, 1993, p.61) constructed through the dense palimpsest of Orientalist writings has no existence outside the texts themselves. For an Orientalist text to be considered true, it has to replicate the same textual attitude toward the Orient, keep it in circulation, and as such maintain it, as the intended signified, in the favorable position located in the Orientalist discourse. DeLillo's *The Names* displays the same approach toward the Orient in general and Iranians in particular.

### 3. 1 Orientalism Re-inscribed: T. E. Lawrence's "27 Articles"

One of the Orientalist texts to which DeLillo's novel is much indebted is T. E. Lawrence's (1917) "27 Articles." Lawrence's work can be considered as an intertext of the novel based on which DeLillo forms his "textual" (Said, 2003) attitude toward Iranians. In what follows, the significance of the connection between *The Names* and "27 Articles" will be explored and ample evidence from both texts are provided in order to shed light on the intertextual relationship between them. What makes this connection remarkable is their similar attempt to address the question of handling the Other; in Lawrence's (1917) case, Arabs, and in DeLillo's (1982), Iranians.

Trying to see himself from his wife's perspective, James Axton, the narrator of *The Names*, compiles a list of 27 statements about himself and interestingly calls it "27 Depravities" which is convincingly based on T. E. Lawrence's (1917) list of "27 Articles." Peter Boxall (2006), in passing, points to the possibility of an intertextual relationship between *The Names* and Lawrence's (1917) "27 Articles." He observes that James' list "is based perhaps on Christian Articles of Faith, or more germanely on T. E. Lawrence's '27 Articles'— a guide to Christians for the effective exploitation and colonization of the Arab world" (p.93). In both cases, the narrators, James in "27 Depravities" and Lawrence in "27 Articles," try to fashion an image of themselves from the perspective of the Other and consequently speak on his or her behalf. In his study of New Orientalists, Ian Almond (2007) observes that "Islam" sometimes becomes an object of study for the Orientalist through which he can discover the "depravities" of the "Self" (p. 10). In other words, the Other (Islam) functions as "a kind of mirror in which the decadent, short-sighted European might finally glimpse the true condition of his decay" (Almond, 2007, p.10). In a similar manner, James Axton, the narrator, represents himself, in a deconstructive gesture, from Kathryn's perspective, not in order to know her, but to "see [himself] through her" (*Names*, p.18) which ultimately proves to be ineffective. This mechanism of silencing characterizes DeLillo's representation of Iranians as well.



Of the 27 articles Lawrence (1917) writes about how to "handle" Arabs, two of which characterize seminal premises of Orientalist discourse and ostensibly resonate throughout *The Names*, though in much more sophisticated ways. Article 27 features the very *raison d'être* of Orientalism which is an "unremitting study of them [Arabs]" (cited in Mack, 1998, p.467). As Lawrence (1917) holds, without knowing Arabs, his fellow men could not fulfill their supposedly *la mission civilisatrice*. Lawrence's equation of handling Arabs with knowing them points to the Foucauldian (1980) idea that "it's not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge," or, to put it the other way round, "it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (cited in Mills, 2005, p.69). Drawing on this idea, Said (2003) makes the conclusion that "knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control" (p.37). Worthy of note is also DeLillo's tacitly positing the role of an empire for America in the late 1970s for its interventions in foreign countries' internal affairs.

Another important point about Lawrence's (1917) article 27 is his calling for an extensive research into "what is going on beneath the surface" (p. 467) among Arab societies. He continues to urge his fellow men to "read their characters, [and] discover their tastes and their weaknesses" (p. 467). The "research" that Lawrence (1917) talks of is obviously a cover for espionage, the very theme constituting *The Names*. Interestingly, the bulk of the novel's characters are spies—the "business men" who finally turn out to be intelligence agents working for CIA in the Middle Eastern countries.

The article 23 in Lawrence's (1917) text marks another essential characteristic of Orientalist style of thinking. In this article, he seems to be assuming a "positional superiority which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (Said, 2003, p. 8). Lawrence (1917) says:

The open reason that Bedu give you for action or inaction may be true, but always there will be better reasons left for you to divine. You must find these inner reasons (they will be denied, but are none the less in operation) before shaping your arguments for one course or other. Allusion is more effective than logical exposition: they dislike concise expression. ("Articles," p. 467)

His idea that the Oriental subject dislikes "concise expression" is one of the essential motifs of Orientalist discourse due to which, "want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is [deemed] the main characteristic of the Oriental mind" (Said, 2003, p.39). Essentialization of such differences between "us" and "them" is one of the key features of all Orientalist narratives. And, they are aimed to broaden as well as maintain the ontological and epistemological binary divisions held between the Occident and the Orient (Said, 2003). We will discuss in detail how DeLillo's representation of Iranians aligns itself with Lawrence's Orientalist attitude toward the Oriental.

### **3. 2 Orientalism re-considered: Parodic revision of T. E. Lawrence's "27 Articles"**

DeLillo's ambiguous position toward Orientalism becomes evident in his demystification of some of Lawrence's (1917) articles. That aside, the very pejorative term "depravities" that DeLillo uses instead of "articles" gestures to his parodic revisionism of Lawrence's text, hence his re-inscribing of some of its basic codes. In article 8, Lawrence (1917) suggests that the ideal position a British officer might have is when he is "present and not noticed" (cited in Mack, p.464). The importance of this issue— invisibility of the colonizer among the colonized— is moreover underscored in the articles 14 and 18. The article 14 says: "[t]he less apparent your interferences the more your influence" (p. 465). Thus, "the complete success," article 18 suggests, is "when the Arabs forget your

strangeness" (p. 465). The futility of such advice is exposed in a number of passages where Eliades, a Greek guy seemingly working as a Sales rep for some European firms, complains about the presence of "American intelligence agencies" (*Names*, p.236) in foreign countries. Pointedly, in one revealing dialogue, undermining Lawrence's absurd theory, he tells James: "You don't see us. This is the final humiliation. The occupiers fail to see the people they control" (*Names*, p. 237).

For a British officer to be invisible, Lawrence (1917) suggests, he has to learn the native Arabs' wearing costumes and other traditions. His articles 12, 17, 18, 19, 20 discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this issue. His Article 20, for instance, observes:

If you wear Arab things at all, go the whole way. Leave your English friends and customs on the coast, and fall back on Arab habits entirely. It is possible, starting thus level with them, for the European to beat the Arabs at their own game, for we have stronger motives for our action, and put more heart into it than they. ("Articles," p.465)

DeLillo exposes the pointlessness of this Colonialist idealistic desire, for instance, in the passage where Owen, the archeologist, talks of the impossibility of achieving an absolute state of mimicry. He tells James:

To learn the geography and language, wear the aba and keffiyeh, go brown in the desert sun. To infiltrate Mecca. Imagine it, to enter the city with one and a half million pilgrims, cross the border within the border, make the hadj. What enormous fears would a man like me have to overcome, what lifelong inclinations toward solitude, toward the sanctity of a personal space in which to live and be. (*Names*, p. 296)

This effort, James sums up is "beyond our reach" (p. 296). That aside, Lawrence's (1917) Article 20 contains a very crucial credo of

imperialist thought, that is, the strong "altruistic" sense of responsibility the Colonizers purportedly feel toward the Colonized— responsibility for the holy mission of civilizing the uncivilized. This is seemingly the "stronger motive" Lawrence has in mind. This issue is also undermined in Eliades' words where he exposes the economic underpinnings of American imperialism. He says:

Our future does not belong to us. It is owned by the Americans. The Sixth Fleet, the men who command the bases on our soil, the military officers who fill the U.S. embassy, the political officers who threaten to stop the economic aid, the businessmen who threaten to stop investing, the bankers who lend money to Turkey ... We are repeatedly sold out, taken lightly, deceived, totally ignored ... The bidet of America, we call this place. Do you want to hear the history of foreign interference in this century alone? (*Names*, p. 236-237)

It bears mentioning that the very idea of America as an empire was still kept at bay in 1970s decades. During the Cold War years, as Shelley Streeby (2007) puts it, "it was the Soviet Union, and not the United States, that was imperialist" and accordingly, "this logic suggested that an aggressive U. S. military policy was a defensive response to the threat that communist expansion posed to capitalist democracies" (p. 99).

There is another passage in which Andreas Eliades takes issue with the "interesting" way "Americans learn geography and world history" (*Names*, p. 58) through media. He says:

I think it's only in a crisis that Americans see other people. It has to be an American crisis, of course. If two countries fight that do not supply the Americans with some precious commodity, then the education of the public does not take place. But when the dictator falls, when the oil is threatened, then you turn on the television and they tell you where the country is, what

the language is, how to pronounce the names of the leaders, what the religion is all about, and maybe you can cut out recipes in the newspaper of Persian dishes ... The whole world takes an interest in this curious way Americans educate themselves. TV. Look, this is Iran, this is Iraq. Let us pronounce the word correctly. E-ron. E-ronians. This is a Sunni, this is a Shi'ite. Very good. Next year we do the Philippine Islands, okay?" ... All countries where the U.S. has strong interests stand in line to undergo a terrible crisis so that at last the Americans will see them. (*Names*, p. 58)

Generally speaking, Eliades takes up the counter-voice in the novel and his presence is to undermine the "logocentricity" of James' narrative. In the above passage, he once again reflects upon the invisibility of the marginal in the eyes of the center— hence the dominance of media narrative in American society, propagating an *American* version of reality. James' juxtaposition of Iran and Iraq is also noteworthy. It probably hints at the time "Iraqi ground troops moved into Iran at four points along the border" (*Names*, p.233). James, interestingly, refers to Iranian events in the most oblique ways, mostly as a means to pinpoint the time order of his narrative.

### 3. 3 Orientalist representation of Iranians

James Axton's utter recklessness in comprehending the reality going on in his life, reminiscent of Ford Madox Ford's (1915) narrator in *The Good Soldier*, makes him a "victim of misunderstanding" (*Names*, p.319) as he comes to realize at the end of the novel. Relying on his memories of the past, James endeavors to narrate his experiences as an unwitting spy in the Middle East during 1979 and 1980 in an effort to make sense of it, hence the cognitive quality of writing. Thus, the narrative vacillates between James the narrator and James the character.

On many occasions James refers to the major historical events in the Middle East, indicating their importance to him and to the "the parent," (*Names*, pp. 48,268,271) the company for which he works. In the early sections of the novel, for instance, James says that "the summer in which we sat on [David Keller's] broad terrace, was the period after the shah left Iran, before the hostages were taken, before the Grand Mosque and Afghanistan" (*Names*, p.66). In this episode, David Keller, for the first time in the course of novel, is asked to give an account of his experiences in Iran, the country for which he is "responsible." Keller's story abounds with Orientalist images and motifs epitomizing the general approach of the novel toward Iranians. James re-narrates Keller's story as follows:

In Tehran ... he invented the name Chain Day. This was the tenth day of Muharram, the period of mourning and self-flagellation. As hundreds of thousands of people marched toward the Shahyad monument, some of them wearing funeral shrouds, striking themselves with steel bars and knife blades affixed to chains, David was hosting a Chain Day party at his house in North Tehran, an area sealed off from the marchers by troops and tank barricades. The partygoers could hear the chanting mobs but whether they were chanting "Death to the shah" or "God is great," and whether it mattered, no one knew for sure. The thing he feared in Tehran was traffic. The apocalyptic inching pack-ice growl of four miles of cars. The drivers' free-form ways. Cars kept coming at him in reverse. He was always finding himself driving down a narrow street with a car coming toward him backwards. The driver expected him to move, or ascend, or vanish. Eventually he saw what was so fearful about this, a thing so simple he hadn't been able to isolate it from the larger marvel of a city full of cars going backwards. They did not reduce speed when driving in reverse. To David Keller,

between wives, this seemed an interesting thing. There was a cosmology here, a rich structure of some kind, a theorem in particle physics. Reverse and forward were interchangeable. And why not, what was the difference really? A moving vehicle is no different moving backwards than it is moving forwards, especially when the driver regards the whole arrangement as if he were on foot, able to touch, to bump, to brush his way past vague obstacles in the street. This was the second revelation of David's stay in Tehran. People drove as if they were walking. They veered idiosyncratically, these fellows with their army surplus field jackets and their interesting sense of space. (*Names*, p.65)

We should remember that this story antedates Iran's Revolution. It is the time the US intelligence service, as reflected in Keller's words, could not appreciate the importance of the Iran's uprising, "whether it mattered [or not]" (*Names*, p.65). Relying on the Orientalist archive, Keller represents Iranians as being both epistemologically and ontologically *different* human beings.

The images of "Chain Day," which supposedly is the same Ashura, "steel bars," "knife blades," and also the heavy "traffic" in Tehran's picturesque streets are by no means new to the Orientalist discourse and their only effect is the reinforcement of the stereotypes of the Oriental. Drawing on these cliché images, Keller re-enacts the imperial gesture of Western colonizers toward the Orient in general and Iran in particular.

Keller, in this passage, recalls the day of Ashura, which he calls "chain day," a day in which, the mourners, "strike themselves with steel bars and knife blades affixed to chains" (*Names*, p.65). Regardless of the validity of such a story, the image he evokes of that day aligns itself with the manifest Orientalist motifs such as Islamic fanaticism, hence the Orientalist/Colonialist strategy of "naming." Keller's changing the name of Ashura, without giving any descriptions about the historical and

religious origins of this day, typifies the Orientalist imperative of creating a new textual Orient suiting Westerner's norms and parameters. The Orient, Said observes, is "Orientalized" through these narratives so that it can be appropriated. Interestingly, Vosdanik, one of the marginal characters of the story reflects upon the correlation between "naming" and imperialism. He says "you will want to hurt your enemy, it is in history to destroy his name" (*Names*, p.150).

Another important Orientalist motif employed in Keller's passage is representation of the Oriental as an irrational, illogical, uncouth, oafish, and generally difficult-to-deal-with person. This "mental disorder" is closely associated with Oriental picturesque streets. Said's (2003) offhand remark touches upon the same issue when he says: in such Orientalist descriptions, "the mind of the Oriental, like his picturesque streets, is [described as] eminently wanting in symmetry" (p.39). Lawrence's article 23, as above said, features the same motif.

Keller's adoption of a humorous tone in his philosophizing about Iranians' weird way of car driving, merits particular attention. First of all, it testifies to the very "positional superiority" (Said, 2003, p.8) that, as discussed earlier, an Orientalist assumes for himself vis-à-vis the Orient. Iranians are described to be so dim-witted that they cannot distinguish between forward and backward movement while driving. "Regarding the whole arrangement as if he were on foot," (*Names*, p.65) an Iranian ridiculously drives as though he is walking. The message is clear: Iranians, as an undeveloped nation, are incapable of using modern technologies. Worthy of note is also Keller's posture as an objective, natural logician, who seems to have been studying Iranians in order to discover their peculiar mode of being. Iranians' "interesting sense of space," is one of these hilarious revelations he generously shares with his fellow men. Besides that, his account of Iranians' misuse of automobile, symbolizing modern technologies, hinges on a very important thesis, that is, as Ziauddin Sardar (1999) notes, incompatibility of Islam with the modern world. (p. 78). "To prove the intrinsic inferiority of Islam vis-à-vis modernity," Sardar (1999, p.79) says, Orientalist writers (Huntington,



1997; Lewis, 1993; Žižek, 2002; Baudrillard, 2003) try to measure the Orient against the yardstick of Western modernity with the pre-established resultant idea that "the modern world is too much for them." (p. 79).

### 3. 4 Undermining Orientalism: Iran as "Black Hole"

DeLillo's Orientalist approach toward Iranians, however, should not be simply taken as all-inclusive and single-sided. There are passages in the novel which mark a sense of "incredulity" (Lyotard, 1984, p.xxiv) toward Orientalism and Colonialism as two of the meta-narratives incorporated in the story. Thus, besides his re-inscribing of Orientalist codes, DeLillo seems to be undermining the supposed solidity of Orientalist discourse as well, though subliminally. This issue is well reflected in David Keller's second story about Iran, this time notably after revolution.

Near the ending of the novel, David is again asked to talk about "[his] countries" (*Names*, p.233) including Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iran. Distinguishing Iran from the rest, he describes it in revealing terms: "Iran is different. Collapsed presence, collapsed business. A black hole in other words" (*Names*, p.233). First of all, no longer can we see the tinge of humor in his words at the mention of the name of Iran, rather, he adopts a serious tone indicating the significance of the subject under discussion. Besides that, his appraisal of Iran as a "different" country testifies to his, and to American government at large, misinterpretation and consequently failure to arrive at a true assessment of the country's current situation. The image of the "black hole" also brings to mind the big gap that David finds between his past self-satisfied constructed knowledge of Iran and its present actual one. The apparent reticence in his latter description of Iran carries another important ramification. David has realized that no longer can he define Iran within the narrow Orientalist framework. More pointedly, Iran does not yield itself to the common norms by which the US could represent it. It recalls the moment of visiting image of Lord Shiva in India. At that moment, Owen likewise is "overwhelmed by ... the lack of common measure" to make sense of it

(*Names*, p.280). Ruminating about the US loss of control in Iran, James acknowledges that "[they] who lived there began to feel [they] hadn't *fully* [italics added] appreciated the place" (*Names*, p.96).

### 3. 5 Hostage Crisis: Re-enactment of Orientalism

Hostage Crisis, Longmuir (2005) argues, is the most important historical intertext of the novel and as such it should be studied through an intertextual reading. "Hostage Crisis as an intertext," she observes, "stems ... not only from DeLillo's explicit reference to the event but also from the recognition that the hostage crisis is functionally integrated into *The Names*" (p. 110). This being the case, her core argument is that Americans' treatment of Hostage Crisis— an event which raised serious questions about American national identity —becomes the main preoccupation of the novel based on which DeLillo presents a "critique of the cultural codes that shaped America's reaction to [it]" (Longmuir, 2005, p.110). America's treatment of the crisis was regulated through media narratives of it, all reinstalling and reinforcing the old-fashioned Orientalist and colonialist codes of knowledge about the Oriental— this time precisely Persians. Longmuir (2005) finds a thematic correlation between the seemingly business travelers in the novel whose knowledge of the "foreign cultures" is confined to "the stories of other Westerners" and that of the "U.S. government [who] knew little about Iran other than what other Western sources could tell it" (p. 115). Describing how he gained knowledge about the foreign countries, James, in a very telling sentence, notes that "all these places were one-sentence stories to us" (*Names*, p.94). For instance, "someone would turn up, utter a sentence about foot-long lizards in his hotel room in Niamey, and this became the solid matter of the place, the means we used to fix it in our minds" (*Names*, p.94). Having been [in Cairo] for only "one day to finish an update for the local associate" (*Names*, p.93), James totalizes his short experience of Cairo as what Cairo in reality is this way: "Cairo the radarless airport, Cairo the flocks of red-dyed sheep crossing downtown streets, the roofless buses, people hanging over the sides" (*Names*, p.93).

The result of reliance on this limited knowledge, Longmuir (2005) says, was "America's complete misinterpretation of events in Iran" (p. 115). She does not however suggest how a "true" interpretation of the events could be made possible when it was the power working through dominant discourses which determined how Iran's events could be represented. The idea of the loss of common tools by which the Americans could measure the alterity of the Other, Iranians in the case of Hostage Crisis, is reiterated throughout the novel in several occasions. Confronted with the "image of Lord Shiva" (*Names* p.280) in an Indian sanctum, James and his friend Owen try to make sense of it but in vain. James says:

Owen tried intently to collect information, make sense of this ... Precision was one of the raptures he allowed himself, the lyncean skill for selection and detail, the Greek gift, but here it was useless, overwhelmed by the powerful rush of things, the raw proximity and lack of *common measure* [italics added]. (*Names*, p.94)

In another passage, inflicted by the feeling of being an outsider in the foreign countries, or, in Bhabha's (2004) terminology, a sense of "unhomeliness that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (p.13), James broods over his confrontations with the "Other(s):"

It seemed we'd lost our capacity to select, to ferret out particularity and trace it to some center which our minds could relocate in knowable surroundings. There was no equivalent core. The forces were different, the orders of response eluded us. Tenses and inflections. *Truth was different* [italics added], the spoken universe, and men with guns were everywhere. (*Names*, p.94)

The "truth" appears to be "different" to James because he cannot simply define it according to the Western norms of knowledge available

to him. More pointedly, since his knowledge of the Other is already filtered through dominating power-willed discourses such as Orientalism, or in James' case, precisely American Exceptionalism, James cannot put aside the prejudices generated by, as Emmanuel Levinas calls it, the Western "ontology of sameness" (cited in Almond, 2007, p.203).

The American media's reaction to Hostage Crisis is emblematic (and perhaps the cause) of Americans' failure to perceive the symbolic meaning of it. Instead of viewing it as the Iranians' objection to the US's long record of interventions in Iran's internal affairs since the 1950s, the media narratives, translated the event, mainly through "de-contextualization," into a heinous assault committed by Iranian "mad" masses upon a bunch of innocent American individuals. Subsequently, this violence was admittedly identified with terrorism. What makes this (willing) "failure" in interpretation of the symbolic aspect of the event more remarkable is the fact that, as Christopher Andrew says, "[t]he hostage crisis had more intensive television coverage than any event since the Second World War, even including Vietnam," (cited in Longmuir, p.111) hence the indisputable impact of mass media on the American society as the only source through which they "educate themselves" (*Names*, p.58) about world's affairs.

That "Iranian hostage crisis force[s] a relativization of Western thought and philosophy" (Longmuir, 2005, p.117) is quite valid, however, Longmuir's (2005) effort to reduce the novel to a monologic narrative signaling one single message is objectionable. Put differently, she seems to be replicating the very thing she sets to critique. And, that is her overstating novel's "anti-totalizing" feature at the expense of ignoring its "totalizations." In other words, although DeLillo seems to be underscoring the Americans' neo-imperialism in the Middle Eastern countries, he, at the same time, endorses the same Orientalist codes in representing them. Even in his reliance on Orientalist discourse, as above said, DeLillo adopts an ambiguous position. On the one hand, he desires for questioning the totalizing effect of Orientalism, and on the other

hand, finds himself bound to comply with its basic constructs if his interpretation of the terrorism is to be taken as an authorized "statement."

### **3. 6 Desert one: Silencing the "unwelcome truth"**

Dennis Porter observes that "writing about another culture entails a heterogeneous discourse, marked by gaps, contradictions and inconsistencies" (cited in Mills, 1997, p.119). One of such "inconsistencies" is discernable in DeLillo's treatment of the "Desert One," the Tabas Desert Operation. This event which is as equally important as the Hostage Crisis is represented in the most illusive way. James, "the unwitting tool of the CIA" in John Duvall's (2008, p.6) words, while unconvincingly appearing to have no role in the whole affair, once in a while, refers to the Desert One as an event which "was still to come" (*Names*, p.233) and finally, in a matter-of-fact tone glosses the whole affair this way: "the commando raid that ended two hundred and fifty miles from Tehran" (*Names*, p.233). He does not even hint at whether it ended in failure or success. It is noteworthy that this event received similarly the least coverage by the Western media of the time. In this sense, the Desert One becomes another "one-sentence" story (p. 94), as James would call it, accruing to itself factual status because of its production within the imperial nexus of power relations.

Thus, we cannot simply look for a unified vision in the novel at the risk of reducing it to an all-encompassing narrative. Although DeLillo appears to be deconstructing the logocentric Western thought, he cannot avoid falling into the trap of Orientalist and Colonialist discursive practices, such as representation of the Orient as a monolithic, homogenous entity. Reflecting on the way Muslims make hajj in Mecca, Owen, for instance, describes the hajjis as "a swirl of white-clad people running around the massive black cube, a whirlwind of human awe and submission ... mov[ing] at a pace determined by the crowd itself" (p. 296). The very thought of it, Owen says, is fearfully "haunt[ing]" and "destructive" (p. 296), because he, with a "lifelong inclinations toward solitude, toward the sanctity of a personal space in which to live and be,"

cannot let "the chanting wave of men," "burn away [his] self" (p. 296). In this manifestly Orientalist passage, Muslims are represented as constituting a monolithic mass identity ruled over by "herd instinct," hence assuming an absolutely opposite position for the Westerner as an individual self. It bears noting that this is one of the basic strategies employed by Orientalists to contrast the "Others" as an indistinguishable mass with the "Us" as a community of individuals (Steuter & Wills, 2008, p.27).

### **3.7 Totalizing effect: Islamicizing terrorism**

As is usual with all his novels dealing with the Orient, DeLillo, in *The Names* ultimately takes side with the totalizing discourse of Orientalism and as such undermines his own postmodernist anti-totalizing efforts. This issue comes to fore especially in his persistent identification of terrorism with the Orient. In this novel, for instance, after having "Orientalized" Iranians, he finds himself bound to comply with the official account of the reality authorized by the power discourse tracing the roots of "Islamist fundamentalist" terrorism in the context of Iran's Revolution.

The ending of the novel reflects back on its earlier Orientalist claims, this time with the aim of Islamicizing terrorism. Apart from numerous references made to different cities and events in Iran, there are times the narrator explicitly relates cult murders to Iran's tumultuous situation during Islamic revolution. In a critical moment, Andahl, one of the self-professed members of the cult who had recently parted from the group makes a revealing dialogue with James. Acting as the only conduit from inside of the Conradian "heart of darkness," Andahl talks of Tabriz, a northwest city in Iran as the first place in which he had become familiar with the cult.

No one knows we exist. No one is looking for us. When I first heard of this, before I became a member, it was in Tabriz, eight years ago. People in a hotel talked of a cult murder somewhere in the area. Much later, I

cannot tell you how, I learned what the elements were.  
(*Names*, p.208)

In another passage, James, who had by then entered the novel's "heart of darkness," explicitly refers to Iran as perhaps the permanent habitat of the cultists. Talking about one of the cultists, James says "all he knew was that they'd been with Singh [a cultist] in Iran" (*Names*, p.290). Or when an officer turns up to question some native Indians about the suspicious murders related to the cult, James describes the event this way: "he would be sitting in the dust, blue-eyed and sparsely bearded, without documents or money, and he would probably try to speak to them in some dialect of northwest Iran" (*Names*, p.309).

These throwaway references to Iran are not to be taken for granted. Rather, they have to be seen as authorized "statements" which aim to consolidate an ideological relationship between Iran's Islamic Revolution and the rise of religious terrorism in post-Cold War era. *The Names'* reductive message is clear: Iran is possibly harboring terrorism in the Middle East, the very allegation made against Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. What these narratives exclude is their being located in the larger dominating discourses whose "regulatory" forces do not allow a polyphonic and multi-dimensional approach to *the* terrorism under discussion. If Hostage Crisis, for instance, is to be taken as an act of terrorism, why it should not be subjected to a dialogic reading— a reading which would address the myriad contingent factors involved in this event. That aside, how is that the US's military reaction to it, Desert One, which is considered as an act of state-sponsored terrorism from the Iranian perspective, is marginalized and as such, it is systematically silenced lest its non-discursive reality would disturb the serenity of the dominant discourse of terrorism?

#### 4. Conclusion

Orientalism is one of the preeminent discourses within which terrorism is assigned a fixed, though insecure and subject to resistance, place. Thus, one can detect a dynamic process of Orientalizing terrorism in almost all "interpretations" of actual incidents labeled as terrorism in contemporary postmodern fiction. This issue is most evident in the so-called American "terrorist novels" (Kunkel, 2005, p.1) of both pre- and post- 9/11. *The Names*, as a pre-9/11 terrorist novel, both relies on and parts with the Orientalist discourse in its representation of the Orientals including Iranians. This paradoxical approach is well reflected in DeLillo's simultaneous evocation and parodic revision of T. E. Lawrence's (1917) "27 Articles." When it comes to terrorism, however, the novel ultimately manages to reinforce the very Orientalist presuppositions it appears to subvert. In the case of *Hostage Crisis*, for instance, the novel turns a blind eye to the historical, political, and also cultural parameters implicated in the event. Or, more significantly, the equally important event, *Desert One*, is totally marginalized as though nothing actually happened. In this novel, DeLillo for the first time raises the question of handling Iranians after Islamic Revolution in American contemporary fiction. Finding the available discourses about Iran not adequate and strong enough to be able to impose a favorable framework upon the absolute "otherness" of Iran's Post-Revolutionary events, DeLillo metaphorically defines Iran for the time being as "a black hole" which defies any monologic description. Despite his recognizing the inadequacy of the Orientalist discourse in containing Iran, DeLillo, however, does not go to the bother of addressing it to a polyphonic reading. This study aimed to expose "the situatedness" of the novel, its being located within the dominating discourses and thereby laying bare some patterns of the affiliations weaving the ideological texture of the novel.



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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Kunkel (2005) in "Dangerous Characters" defines American terrorist novel as "the novel proposing terrorists among its main characters, and meant as literature rather than disposable suspense fiction." (p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> This post-Structuralist stance toward language can also be traced in DeLillo's earlier novels such as *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), and *Ratner's Star* (1976). (Oriard, 1978, p. 8).

<sup>3</sup> It was later adapted into *Escape* (Clavell, 1994), a shorter novel.