

GENDER, TRAGEDY, AND REPRESENTATION:  
THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN 9/11 LITERATURE

By

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how works of 9/11 literature, both fiction and nonfiction, reflect a revitalization of gender roles in American culture among their characters or subjects, and uses feminist theory to address why this process was such an immediate reaction of American society in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In order to conduct support this argument, nonfiction texts by Dean E. Murphy and Jim Dwyer & Kevin Flynn, works of fiction by Jay McInerney, Jonathan Safran Foer, Frédéric Beigbeder, and Claire Tristram, and texts of feminist theory by Susan Faludi, Judith Butler, and Betty Friedan are analyzed and brought together in discussion.

## PART I: INTRODUCTION

Thirteen years after the devastating terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, many still struggle to explain the personal and political implications of that day. In the immediate aftermath, bone-chilling and heart-wrenching reactions to the terrorist attacks poured in from the most famous to the most ordinary of people. Among the sudden demand for blatant displays of patriotism and declarations of allegiance to the American cause was a desperate desire for daily life to return to a state of normalcy, and once the initial wave of post-traumatic shock settled enough to allow for reflection, people of all circumstances began to identify and express their feelings. Everyone dealt with the emotional burden in the way they knew best: parents cared, teachers explained, speakers spoke, and writers wrote.

Even the most accomplished and articulate of writers, however, experienced the difficulty of dealing with such a painful and unthinkable subject. In *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009), Kristiaan Versluys analyzes and unpacks several high-profile 9/11 novels. In his introduction to the text, Versluys situates the act of writing 9/11 fiction within the tragedy itself as a therapeutic activity, but one that does not necessarily equal emotional relief. He comments on the simultaneous desire for writers to express soothing sentiments but to claim no selfish authority over such a nationally shared tragedy: "...there is the need on the part of the traumatized to relieve anxiety through telling, a feeling on the part of the victims that they have the duty to testify and the desire on the part of the listener to learn more about trauma in order to reintroduce it into a network of signification" (Versluys 4). The writing and reading of 9/11 texts, fiction or nonfiction, provides people with a way to face the event without reliving it in a literal sense. However, "In the instantaneity of its horror and in its far-flung repercussions, 9/11 is unpossessable. It is a limit event that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture and defeats

the normal processes of meaning making and semiosis” (Versluys 1). This ‘unpossessability’ of 9/11 as a literary subject, combined with a nationwide desire to process the tragedy, makes for a complex platform from which the genre of 9/11 literature springs.

Also complex is the ability of 9/11 literature to reflect habits of American society and consciousness following the attack. In the post-traumatic search for a feeling of safety and stability, American people fell into habits that reinforced traditional gender roles and expectations about how men and women should function in relation to their families, fellow citizens, and each other: generally, men were called upon to be pillars of strength while women were asked to ensure domestic stability. These gendered cultural habits also found their way into this growing collection of 9/11-based creative work that writers, both prominent and unknown, composed in the months and years of coping that followed the attacks. As a whole, the genre of 9/11 literature tends to treat men as strong problem-solvers and women as supportive saviors. In this thesis, I will examine how works of 9/11 literature, both fiction and nonfiction, display this revitalization of gender roles among their characters or subjects, and I will use feminist theory to address why this process was such an immediate reaction of American society in the aftermath of the attacks.

Of course, telling the story of 9/11 is a complicated and controversial undertaking. Part of the difficulty of the task is the knowledge that no writer can ever properly express the suffering and traumatic aftermath of that day. The diverse range of experiences and recollections from the attacks are endless in their scope, and it is impossible to convey them in the full clarity that each deserves. It seems, however, that the perspective that writers are the most inclined to embrace is that of men. From male victims of the tragedy to male protagonists who watched it unfold from

afar, there is an undeniable gendered trend in this selected point of view. With this reality in mind, how, then, are women incorporated and depicted in works of 9/11 literature?

I argue that female characters in 9/11 fictional works generally fit into one or more of three core categories: the *mothers*, the *love interests*, and the *caregivers*. Women in each group operate differently within the various contexts of each work. The mothers are often present within the stories to care for their sons or daughters who lose fathers to the attacks or to console and nurture children left traumatized by the entire ordeal. Characters of romantic interest include not only the wives and girlfriends of male protagonists, but their partners in unfaithful or adulterous affairs. Some women of 9/11 fiction identify more than once in this category, and most deal with their romantic endeavors more directly than with the attacks themselves. The category of caregivers broadly encompasses female characters that act as non-professional volunteers or figures of emotional and familial support surrounding the crisis. With few exceptions, all women in 9/11 literature fit into this category in some way, in addition to roles they might have within the other two groups. Later, in my close examination of Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003), and Claire Tristram's *After* (2005), I will show how most 9/11 novels only offer female characters that are limited to and defined by these three main roles.

Because I view these books as tools that will help me to explore and support my argument, I will most closely focus on female representation and experience in each text. The plot of each text, of course, is crucial to understanding how and why female characters are developed in such a gendered way. However, in order to examine the operation of gender roles

within 9/11 literature, I must consider the plots and male characters in each work as the context in which the women of 9/11 fiction exist, rather than the focus of my critical analysis.

Not all 9/11 literature comes in the form of the novel; several nonfiction texts that compile and document personal recollections from the attack are just as revelatory of these gendered patterns. Two particular book-length texts, Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn's *102 Minutes* (2005) and Dean E. Murphy's *September 11: An Oral History* (2002) offer a chance to compare real-life accounts of 9/11 to fictional versions. Both texts organize and record individual oral histories from that day in order to tell the story of the attacks from the perspectives of various civilians and officials who experienced them firsthand. Even though many women share their personal experiences in these works, editors and authors have still managed to compile a mostly male-driven narration of the events, since the vast majority of the subjects and interviewees are men.

This selection of 9/11 literature is not the only available resource for examining the position of women in the genre. Obviously, it is necessary to study feminist theory alongside these texts in order to best understand the historical implications and examples of gender roles in the United States. Some theorists have done work in that is directly related to women and 9/11, but feminist theory that predates the attacks is still relevant and helpful to this discussion. I will use the thoughts of feminist thinkers such as Susan Faludi, Judith Butler, and Betty Friedan alongside the selected texts in order to consider the ideology behind the heavy weight of gender roles in post-9/11 American society. In her 2008 book *The Terror Dream*, Faludi asks, "Why were independent female voices censored and a bugle call sounded to return to Betty Crocker domesticity?" (Faludi 199). By using the women of 9/11 fiction and nonfiction to illustrate the restrictions on these "independent female voices," I will apply questions and ideas such as

Faludi's to investigate and address the gendered depictions of women in post-9/11 literature and society.

In her opening chapter titled "We're at War, Sweetheart," Faludi tracks the post-9/11 condemnation of feminist thought and the negligence of women's concerns. She notes how voices in the media depicted feminism to be an American weakness that helped lead to the nation's vulnerability: "...women's independence had become implicated in our nation's failure to protect itself. And, conversely, the need to remedy that failure somehow required a distaff correction, a discounting of female opinions, a demeaning of the female voice, and a general shrinkage of the female profile" (21).

The limited representation of women in 9/11 literature goes beyond the simple dichotomy between men and women that is implied by the term "gender roles". Not only are female characters portrayed in stereotypical, disappointing ways, women are underrepresented among the writers who create such work. With only one exception, men are the authors of every text, both fiction and nonfiction, discussed in this thesis. This lack of female authorial perspective among the small category of 9/11 literature makes for a male-dominated genre that cannot appropriately account for female experience, and it must be kept in mind while considering the questions presented in this thesis.

After learning the male-to-female ratios in popular news publications and media in the period following 9/11, the male authorship that dominates 9/11 literature does not come as a shock. Faludi reports:

Three weeks after 9/11, the media watchdog group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) counted the op-ed bylines in the nation's major newspapers and reported similar results: the *New York Times* had now run seventy-nine opinion pieces--eight by women. [...] The *Washington Post* was even worse: it had published 107 commentaries in the three weeks after 9/11--and only seven were by women (36).

She also significantly notes, “For the first six months of 2002, more than 75 percent of the Sunday talk shows on CBS, Fox, and NBC featured *no* female guests” (37). These numbers reveal a very concerning habit in the way that the American public reacts to a crisis: the opinions of men are sought out, trusted, and valued more than those of women. In retrospect, this demonization and erasure of women in the media acted as precursor to the creative underrepresentation of women in 9/11 literature and film that was to come in the following years.

I believe that this topic is worth exploring not only because of its relevance to the most momentous historical landmark of mine and my peers’ lifetimes, but also because there is not a large body of pre-existing criticism and scholarly work about 9/11 literature in particular. While enrolled in an honors seminar dedicated to the literature and film of 9/11, I could not help but notice similarities in the ways that the variety of texts characterized and dealt with women. I wrote about this literary pattern for the course’s final research paper assignment, but felt that due to length and time limits, I left a considerable amount of valid material unexplored. For this thesis project, I aim to build off and improve my arguments from my original research paper while adding a greater level of inquiry and complexity to my work. I will begin with my examination of selected works of 9/11 nonfiction and the way that these texts represent women. Then, I will analyze several works of 9/11 fiction in order to demonstrate how they reproduce female stereotypes rooted in gender roles from post-9/11 society. Finally, I will wrap up my argument by drawing conclusions about the ability of 9/11 literature to epitomize the gendered social roles given to women in post-9/11 America.

## PART II: TEXTS OF 9/11 NONFICTION

In the immediate rush to document and understand 9/11 in the days and weeks that followed, there was a desperate desire to know the tale of what “really” happened, as told by those who experienced the trauma. Between opinion pieces, news interviews, and more, a massive collection of firsthand accounts of the attacks emerged, allowing analysts to compare stories and begin to assemble a larger and more complete narrative of 9/11. From this growing compilation of stories, two particularly notable full-length books emerged: Dean E. Murphy’s *September 11: An Oral History* (2002), and Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn’s *102 Minutes* (2005). The authors of both books, through extensive interviews and research, pieced together various recollections of the day in order to directly highlight personal experience, like in Murphy’s work, or to present different recollections of the day, like in Dwyer and Flynn’s work. In this section, I will examine the presence of female points of view in these two major nonfiction books in order to later contrast them with the gendered and limited roles of women in works of 9/11 fiction.

In *September 11: An Oral History*, Dean E. Murphy assembles the stories of eyewitnesses in and around the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, in addition to people around the city and country who had intense connections to the day’s events. In his introduction, he describes September 11th as “the raw experiences of thousands of everyday people, from generals to window washers, from police officers to housewives, caught up in the same hellish events on the same hellish day under the same hellish circumstances” (4). The book is divided into six sections: “In the North Tower,” “In the South Tower,” “On the Outside,” “To the Rescue,” “Narrow Escapes,” and “In the Pentagon.” The stories are listed by the subjects’ names and organized into these sections according to the locations or specific circumstances of the narrators. In total, there are 39 narrators, 13 of whom are women. Murphy does not intersperse

his own commentary throughout the text, but he does admit that the stories “are not verbatim transcriptions of tape-recorded conversation” and that sometimes, “[people] turned to me to make sense out of a series of rambling conversations and written communications” (5). Clearly, Murphy’s editorial decisions impacted the final presentation of these stories, but he intends each one to be read as a personal narrative rather than a piece of his own journalism.

Differently, in *102 Minutes*, Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn use a conglomeration of interviews, narratives, and oral histories to piece together a timeline of the one hundred and two minutes that passed between the first plane’s impact and the final collapse of the Twin Towers. Rather than allowing individual oral histories to stand alone, as per Murphy’s work, Dwyer and Flynn intertwine the stories of their interviewees, effectively piecing together an account of the entire one hundred and two minutes of trauma. In the text, those who survived convey the experiences of those who did not, and those who remember highly specific details make up for those who have forgotten or blocked their memories. The ability of Dwyer and Flynn to organize such a large mass of recollections into one coherent report that reads like a narrative is quite remarkable. Because the authors scatter small anecdotes and details from different eyewitnesses all throughout the book, we do not usually get prolonged, extensive glimpses into any individual personalities. Instead, the authors tend to provide names and brief descriptions in order to place a sharper focus on the actions of these people. Dwyer and Flynn use “the words, witnesses, and records” to “provide not only a broad and chilling view of the devastation, but also a singularly revealing window onto acts of grace at a brutal hour” (xxi).

The front cover of *September 11: An Oral History* displays the tagline “Real stories from ordinary people,” and the back cover of *102 Minutes* features quotes containing phrases like “commonplace heroics.” It is likely these sentiments that attract readers, especially Americans,

to 9/11 nonfiction: we want to know what these people really went through because we realize that they were “ordinary” just like us. We cannot imagine the trauma that the victims and survivors experienced, but reading their memories somehow allows us to pay them our respects. Ordinary Americans who look to 9/11 nonfiction for these reasons, then, must be able to look for some reflection of themselves or their own lives in the texts.

The nonfiction portion of the 9/11 literary genre is complex because it does not always confine women to the gendered societal expectations that I have previously discussed. In fact, its classification as nonfiction work provides the opportunity to tell the stories of women who did *not* adhere to the typical domestically-supportive roles in which women were placed after 9/11. In the following paragraphs, I will analyze these two major works of 9/11 nonfiction in order to identify two notable non-stereotyped representations of women.

Although the stories featured in *September 11: An Oral History* and *102 Minutes* are all worth reading, I will focus on a few individual accounts that either are told by women or discuss specific women. Interestingly, both books reference a female police officer named Moira Smith, who, while positioned in the south tower, made it her own duty to ensure that the evacuation effort continued efficiently with the smallest possible amount of distractions. Dwyer and Flynn describe Officer Smith as they tell the story of Ed Nicholls, a south tower evacuee:

She is wearing blue disposable gloves. Her blond hair is pulled back from her face; she had left her police hat on the seat of the van in which she and her partner drove down to the trade center from Greenwich Village. Smith had not been dispatched to the trade center; she had been filling out forms when she saw the van loaded and ready to go. She jumped on. [...] No one had the quotidian task of shepherding people from the buildings to the ambulances. Moira Smith, policewoman, joined the security guards, firefighters, and Port Authority bureaucrats who had taken that job upon themselves (206-7).

Then, in Murphy’s book, another south tower survivor named Martin Glynn recalls his brief yet profound encounter with Officer Smith:

I see Officer Smith's face in my mind every day. She was pretty, with shoulder-length blond hair. She was also scared, her eyes said as much. But most of all she was courageous. Not in the sense that she ran into a burning building and dragged someone to safety, but in the sense that she took her post in the lobby of our building and kept the evacuation moving in an orderly manner. Heroism is not only running into flames. It is doing your job in the face of horror (90).

Later, Glynn continues:

It wasn't until I saw Officer Smith's picture in the newspaper, that I even knew her name. And even then I wasn't sure it was her. The woman in the picture had short hair. I called the Police Department. They told me that she had pinned her hair up for the photograph. On the New York Police Department Web site there is a tribute to the 23 police officers killed on September 11. It is a page of male faces, except for one near the bottom on the right. It is Officer Moira Smith (94).

Even though Glynn's account of Officer Smith is full of reverence, its fixation on her appearance teeters on the edge of patronization. It is difficult to analyze his words without sounding critical of his well-intentioned sentiment, but in a discussion like this, I must do so in order to ask questions about the issue of female representations. At what point does admiration of a woman's involvement in such a dire situation turn into surprise at a woman's capability to handle risk and intensity? I look to the physical descriptions of Officer Smith in both books to ponder this question.

I find it interesting that in both accounts of Officer Smith's courageous actions, each narrator immediately brings up her hair. In *102 Minutes*, it is "**blond** hair pulled back from her face," and in *September 11: An Oral History*, "She was pretty, with shoulder-length **blond** hair" (206, 90, my bold emphasis). The former text even mentions that her hair is so visible because she left her police hat in a vehicle. Her hair, of course, signifies her difference from the other police officers—*male* police officers—and registers as a notice of femininity in the minds of the evacuees who observe and later remember her. Rarely, if ever, does another storyteller in either book recall the hair color or features of a male emergency worker. The fact that these narrators

describe Officer Smith's hair before recognizing and applauding her duties or actions suggests that her femininity, not her courage, is what struck them before anything else. Later on in Glynn's anecdote, he again mentions Officer Smith's hair as he recalls spotting her among pictures of the deceased in a newspaper. He even calls the NYPD to inquire about the picture and learns that he did not fully recognize her because her hair was pulled up (94). Glynn's praise of Officer Smith is obvious, and there is no doubt that he is aware and appreciative of the impact she made on the lives of so many evacuees who were able to find safety—I do not question that. However, because neither text goes into this much detail about any female police officers other than Officer Smith, it is important to take the opportunity to examine the way that these records portray and discuss her.

It is only fair to note that in addition to each text's fixation on Officer Smith's hair, both meticulously describe the minutiae and the significance of her duties in and around the south tower, which ensures that her appearance does not solely define her contributions on such an extreme day of work. For example, Murphy's text credits her for the efficiency of the evacuation: "If she didn't remain firm and calm, people would stop at the windows and see the splattered bodies, the pools of blood and the arms and legs sticking out of the debris. The success of getting so many people out of that burning tower was the orderliness and precision of the operation" (91). Likewise, *102 Minutes* is precise in its description of her work ethic and assistance to one specific survivor: "Smith escorted Ed Nicholls through the concourse of the trade center, leading him out to Church Street on the east side of the complex, where ambulances were staged. Then she returned to the lobby of the south tower" (207). Not only do these recollections act as testaments to Officer Smith's contributions, they reinforce the importance of

remembering and focusing on her courageous actions, instead of her hair or another aspect of her appearance.

To address my earlier question, I believe that these accounts of Officer Smith would cross into patronizing territory if a) they expressed blatant shock at her ability to organize and execute evacuation procedures *despite* being a woman, or b) they failed to shift their focus from her feminine appearance to her commendable work. Rather than blatantly accuse Murphy, Dwyer, Flynn, or any of their interviewees of patronization, I only wish to point out the possibility for internalized, probably unintentional sexist stereotypes to find their way into dialogues about women in positions of leadership. Despite these concerns, the presentation of Officer Moira Smith in these two works is positive in a gender-conscious sense, because it rejects stereotypes that do not allow women to take charge as leaders.

*September 11: An Oral History* offers another prime example of a woman who defies these types of sexist stereotypes. Earlier, I mentioned that Murphy organized his book into six sections. One of them, titled “To the Rescue,” features the narratives of five male first responders. The fact that this section contains no female storytellers might suggest that women do not occupy positions that radiate bravery and leadership. However, the book’s final section contradicts that suggestion. Interestingly, this section, called “In the Pentagon,” includes stories from six people working inside the Pentagon at time of the attack, two of whom are women. The Pentagon, based on its function as a supreme haven of military strategy and authority, is easily assumed to be a man’s world, like the realm of rescue workers. It is notable, then, that two women, one of whom is an Air Force major, are allowed space to tell their stories in this supposedly male-dominated sphere. This woman, Major Janet Deltuva, tells of her actions after feeling the plane’s impact on the Pentagon and beginning the evacuation process: “I am a

biomedical sciences corps specialist and had received disaster preparedness training, so I decided to stop at the [medical] clinic. I am not a doctor, so I knew I would not be saving lives directly, but I could organize and assist and serve as a gofer” (237). Rather than ensuring her own safety and fleeing from the premises, Major Deltuva stepped up to help in a place where she knew that she had skills to offer.

Deltuva acted as a rational and clear-minded aid worker, despite her personal fears (“Most of the time, I felt very calm and was assured that I was doing some good. But I had my moments of fear too”), and ensured that the most mundane and easily-overlooked duties of the immediate relief effort were performed (238). She remembers, “I kept reminding people to drink water so that they wouldn’t become dehydrated. I also gathered pieces of debris that had fallen in the courtyard and put them under the benches so that people wouldn’t trip on them” (239). Her actions perfectly classify her as one of the “ordinary people” that the book claims to celebrate: she did not perform medical procedures or make game-changing military decisions, but she provided immediate and crucial assistance. By taking the initiative to help and jumping from task to task as she saw fit, she was a key player in the Pentagon’s experience of 9/11, one that often gets overlooked due to the enormity of the World Trade Center attacks. Her story reminds us that despite their erasure from the major narratives of 9/11, women were present and involved in the tragic events of the day.

Later, in my discussion of 9/11 fiction, I will describe how female characters in those works are rarely allowed to have direct involvement with the event, either as immediate eyewitnesses or as protagonists who are not deeply tied to their duties as wives, mothers, or caregivers. Obviously, the very nature of fictional works implies that these texts are not meant to rehash the true stories of 9/11 victims and survivors. Nevertheless, the stories of women like

Officer Moira Smith and Major Janet Deltuva prove that a considerable amount of authentic female experience has been left out of 9/11 creative works, which largely confines women to secondary or supportive roles. None of the fictional texts that I will examine contain male characters that are necessarily rescue workers or military personnel, so I cannot claim that men of these specific professions were given unfair preference over women in the creation of 9/11 literature. However, because the women of this literature exist within such a small range of characterizations, our knowledge of women such as Officer Smith and Major Deltuva allows us to realize that 9/11 fiction has largely failed to create complex, stereotype-defying female characters.

### **PART III: TEXTS OF 9/11 FICTION**

#### **1. *The Good Life***

Perhaps the most obvious example of the reinforcement of gender roles within a 9/11 novel is Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*, published in 2006. The story is told from the split perspectives of two vastly different New Yorkers: Corrine Calloway, a married mother of twins in TriBeCa, and Luke McGavock, a wealthy and socially elite ex-businessman, husband, and father. On a street in lower Manhattan on the day following the attacks, Corrine happens to stumble upon a distressed and disoriented Luke, who is on his way home from the rubble after staying almost a full day to lend help to the rescuers. Their lives slowly begin to intertwine as they keep in contact via a volunteer soup kitchen near Ground Zero, and the undeniable attraction and sexual tension between them eventually leads to an elaborate romantic affair. Throughout the novel, we see how this relationship affects Luke, Corrine, and their families, as well as the way that they use it to process 9/11 and reevaluate the directions of their futures.

In *The Good Life*, Corrine's character identifies with all three gendered categories of women in 9/11 literature: *mother*, *love interest*, and *caregiver*. As a *mother*, she is concerned with keeping her young children safe and innocent, as a *love interest*, she watches her marriage deteriorate as her passionate affair blossoms, and as a *caregiver*, she attempts to aid the rescue workers at Ground Zero through her volunteer work. Because she takes on the two sub-identities of both wife and mistress under the *love interest* category (in addition to embodying all three gendered categories), Corrine's character is unique among women of 9/11 literature. Corrine is the epitome of literature's version of a 9/11 woman, but not because of any traits of patriotism or heroism. Instead, her character's complete application to each of these three roles expected of women following the attacks makes her a useful example of stereotypes in 9/11 literature.

First, as a mother, Corrine struggles to reassure her two young children following the attacks, and she is overwhelmed by her concern that an atmosphere of terrorism and fear will have negative effects on their childhoods. Her husband, a book publisher, is engulfed with the knowledge that his best friend is missing and presumably dead. His struggle with his grief and his general dazed and distant aura following the attacks leave Corrine by herself to deal with the reactions of her curious and confused children. Corrine is caught between her post-traumatic shock as a cognizant adult and her duty to appear as a symbol of safety and strength to her children: "Never had she felt quite as dishonest as a parent in the last few days, trying to comfort the children, when she felt absolutely no comfort or security herself" (McInerney 106). Here, Corrine identifies herself as a mother before anything else and puts the well-being of her children before her own mature acceptance and understanding of the attacks. However, because McInerney centers these processes of healing and nurturing around Corrine, rather than allowing

both parents to contribute, her character is bound to a maternal gender role. Later, I will discuss further implications of Corrine's role as a mother.

Next, Corrine is emotionally detached from her husband as a lover, especially after learning about his ongoing affair with a coworker. Over time, "...she shrank further and further away from him, though remaining for the moment at his side, the habitual forms of twenty years of companionship having become ingrained" (195). She feels obligated to retain a civil relationship with him, for the benefit of their children, but it is obvious that her romantic thoughts reside in her growing feelings for Luke, with whom she shortly begins an affair of her own. The majority of the novel from this point forward revolves around Corrine's life as she attempts to keep her unfaithful husband unaware of her own infidelity—it leaves very little room for anything but the progression of her romantic endeavors. Even though Corrine finds the soup kitchen as an outlet through which to personally come to terms with the attacks, this place quickly transforms from the site of her own therapeutic ritual into her main place of rendezvous with her new lover: when Luke asks her if her continued presence at the soup kitchen is due to their blossoming relationship, she says, "That's the bitch of it. I think it probably does have to do with you" (168). This volunteerism is Corrine's one compelling opportunity to develop completely on her own in the aftermath of the attacks, but instead, the soup kitchen becomes another platform on which her romantic saga unfolds. As Corrine "[realizes] just how much she looked forward to his company, and how mixed were her motives in turning up every night, how shallow her charitable impulse," her identification as Luke's romantic interest severely limits the personal therapeutic growth that her character is capable of exploring in the novel (210).

Finally, Corrine's identification as a soup kitchen volunteer is the role that best expresses the nature of the caregiver category of all female 9/11 characters that I discuss in this thesis. The

soup kitchen near Ground Zero, which the text describes as “the improvised domestic diorama-- women serving and men eating,” is the site of the novel’s most blatantly sexist dialogues and stereotypes (113). Even though Corrine begins this volunteer work out of a genuine personal calling to contribute to the disaster relief, her femininity is valued far more than her actual work in this operation. For instance, the coordinator of the soup kitchen encourages the act of flirting around the relief area, specifically stating, “That’s part of your job. [...] These guys need a little cheering up. Why the hell do you think we discourage male volunteers?” (153). In the midst of her genuine efforts as a volunteer, Corrine is literally told that as a woman, her worth lies in her physical appearance and her ability to use it please the male rescue workers. Of course, Corrine’s decision of whether or not to engage in this flirtatious activity is her own, but it is unacceptable for it to be inherently expected from her as a woman. In this demonstration of Corrine’s role as a caregiver, she is degraded and told that it is her duty to be objectified because of her gender.

This is not the only time that Corrine is subject to such blatant objectification and sexist nonsense during her volunteerism. Earlier in the novel, several male volunteers near the soup kitchen (mainly a man called Donahoe, the speaker in the following passage) abruptly end their misogynistic banter when Corrine, unaware of their conversational topic, approaches them. The encounter unfolds as follows:

‘What percentage of the chick population down here is in the fashion-model business? I mean, you must have passed some local legislation against fat and ugly... I don’t know how you boys can stand looking at all that pussy all day long. I’m pretty sure it would drive me crazy. I know it would sure as hell drive my wife crazy, with me spinning my head in every direction like a drunken owl. All this outrageous trim, I think I...’

The thought died as Corrine approached across the cobblestones.

‘Don’t mind me,’ she said.

Donahoe just nodded and tilted his head toward Corrine. ‘Hey, I rest my case’ (139).

From the derogatory comments about women's bodies to the implication that all women are walking sex objects, this type of dialogue insults and devalues women. Not only is Corrine used to exemplify this blatant objectification, but this attitude also suggests that her worth lies in her appearance, not in her volunteerism or work ethic. Especially frustrating about this incident is McInerney's decision to end it immediately after the man's "Hey, I rest my case" comment, therefore leaving no opportunity for this type of behavior to be condemned or challenged, either by Corrine herself or one of the other men in the group, including Luke. This failure to address misogyny problematically allows for readers to perceive it as normal or humorous instead of as derogatory and sexist.

The objectification of a woman in order to make her available for the comfort and pleasure of men is a direct emulation of one of the most archaic sexist myths: that working men need a pretty, cheery woman to come home to at the end of the day in order to ease their stress and lighten their loads. This infamous stereotype of American women is easy to imagine because of its normalization in our memories and recorded histories of post-World War II culture, especially in the prosperous days of the 1950s. In her book called *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan describes this gender role as "The Suburban housewife... she was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment" (Friedan 18). Friedan's suggestion that this lifestyle emulates "true feminine fulfillment" allows us to draw an interesting connection between her second wave feminist work and the social and cultural effects of 9/11. It is understandable and normal for all human beings to feel fulfilled and content when they support and care for those who are most important to them, such as their families and children. This care, however, was expected far more from women than from men after 9/11. In dealing with 9/11, it seems that the American

public was largely inclined to allow men to do the 'dirty work' while women provided emotional and domestic support, and this trend is certainly exemplified in the amount of 9/11 literature presented from the male point of view. These post-9/11 gender roles dictated that women should find Friedan's "true feminine fulfillment" in their nurturing familial duties, instead of in whatever outlets helped them to personally deal with the attacks, such as Corrine's work at the soup kitchen.

In *The Good Life*, Corrine's roles as a mother, lover, and caregiver define her character above all else. With respect to Friedan's remarks, however, it is worth noting that she finds her 'feminine fulfillment' in her extramarital affair with Luke, because she feels everything but fulfilled in her own marriage. Here, Corrine is able to escape from the traditional modest housewife stereotype that she so easily fits into. Although the moral issues surrounding her involvement in the affair are up for debate, it is important that Corrine is allowed enough independence, as a grown woman, to choose to engage in such activity. This deviance from the notion of a perfect, committed wife is notable within a novel so entrenched with 9/11 gender stereotypes, but it still does not allow her character to develop beyond her identification as a romantic interest.

Of course, Corrine is not the only female character in *The Good Life*. Corrine and Sasha McGavock, Luke's wife, are arguably the novel's two most central female characters. Upon multiple readings of the novel, I have taken a special interest in its depiction of motherhood, especially since both of these women most significantly function as mothers within the text. In addition to their limitation to these maternal roles, Corrine and Sasha are not even allowed to be 'good' mothers within the novel. Of course, this observation brings up the question of what constitutes a 'good' mother. The novel offers no standard definition, but it does offer examples

of what a mother should *not* be: too paranoid<sup>1</sup>, too glamorous<sup>2</sup>, too promiscuous<sup>3</sup>, too absent<sup>4</sup>. If Corrine and Sasha are only allowed to be mothers, but they are not even given the potential to be *good* mothers, what does this say about their value as women?

Toward the beginning of the novel, when McInerney begins to introduce his characters, we learn that Corrine is a stay-at-home mother and that Russell does not appreciate this:

Corrine hadn't wanted to be one of those mothers who paid someone else to raise her kids; for the first five years, to the astonishment of her friends and former colleagues, she'd stayed at home [...] Russell had initially supported her maternal ideal, though, as the years went by and their peers bought vacation homes in the Hamptons, he couldn't consistently disguise his resentment over their straitened finances, or his sense that his stay-at-home wife had become translucent, if not invisible, within the walls of their loft—a nanny without a salary (5).

Corrine gives up her career in order to be the best mother that she believes she can be, but she still faces criticism from her husband and friends for doing so. Russell thinks of Corrine as “translucent” and “invisible” within her role as a mother and even admits that he “initially supported her maternal ideal,” implying that he no longer supports her version of motherhood (5). In addition to Corrine's limitation to her role as a mother, this passage devalues her worth in

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to her earlier fear that “Hilary had come to take her children away from her,” Corrine admits to Luke, “I know it's probably irrational, but sometimes I'm terrified that she's going to want to claim [the twins] someday” (15, 164).

<sup>2</sup> Luke fears that Sasha has forced her glamorous lifestyle onto Ashley: he “had finally realized how seriously his wife's ambitions for their daughter diverged from his own three years ago when he'd picked up the *Sunday Times* magazine one morning and discovered a full color picture of [Ashley] standing in front of their building in a Gucci trench coat, under the headline YOUNG FASHION PLATES OF MANHATTAN” (26).

<sup>3</sup> Luke critiques Sasha's “little display of dirty dancing at the zoo” with Bernie Melman, her rumored partner in infidelity (176). Later, Luke, Sasha, and a doctor at Ashley's rehabilitation clinic uncomfortably discuss how “it's possible that Ashley might have been upset by this rumor” about her mother (205).

<sup>4</sup> Sasha's friend Casey comments on Sasha's parenting habits: “I don't see her outside the school at eight a.m. And I'm frankly shocked she left Ashley [alone] in town that weekend” (268).

that role even further. Later, I will discuss how this passage also acts to condemn Sasha's style of motherhood.

Even beyond Russell's criticism, Corrine is consistently critical of herself as a parent and of the decisions that she makes on behalf of her children; on the very first page of the novel, after a reasonably frenzied morning with her kids, Corrine automatically thinks to herself, "Bad mother, bad wife, bad hostess. *Bad*" (1). On top of that, she has massive insecurities about her role in the twins' lives because her sister, Hilary, is their biological mother<sup>5</sup>. When Hilary reintroduces herself into the Calloway home after a long time away in Los Angeles, Corrine immediately feels that "Hilary had come to take her children away from her" (15). This insecurity, although valid due to the complicated nature of the relationship between Corrine, Hilary, and the children, sets the tone for McInerney to present Corrine as an irrational, overly paranoid mother.

Sasha, meanwhile, is characterized as a negligent, uninvolved, self-obsessed mother. Earlier, I referred to Corrine's disgust with the idea of being "one of those mothers who paid someone else to raise her kids" (5). This, however, is the exact type of mother that Sasha is. In a conversation with Luke, Casey Reynes, a mutual friend of both Corrine and Sasha, admits, "I just don't know if motherhood has ever been such a huge priority for Sasha" (268). When a family crisis strikes the McGavocks, we see this negative characterization of Sasha as a mother, along with Luke's instinct to blame his wife for all of their daughter's troubles. Consider this passage from when Sasha informs Luke of Ashley's overdose and hospitalization:

'But she's...alive.'

Sasha nodded, wiping her eyes.

'I thought you were in the Hamptons,' he said, as if by poking holes in this story he might demonstrate its absurdity.

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<sup>5</sup> Hilary donated her eggs to her sister when Corrine had trouble becoming pregnant (47).

‘I was. But at the last minute, Ashley wanted to stay in town with Bethany.’

‘You went out alone? You *left* her here?’

Her expression then was so frightened and vulnerable that he could almost imagine forgiving her everything in advance, even as he considered the implications of Sasha going out to the Hamptons without Ashley. She would hardly have gone out to be alone, not being the sort of girl who believed in the virtues of solitude and reflection. (182-3)

Luke’s exclamation of “You *left* her here?” immediately places blame on Sasha for Ashley’s condition and makes her out to be an inattentive, condemnable mother. His anger is not entirely without reason, because after all, most parents would not love the idea of their adolescent child being alone in Manhattan<sup>6</sup>. It seems, however, that Luke’s thoughts do not immediately turn to his hospitalized daughter; instead, he bitterly considers the “implications of Sasha going out to the Hamptons without Ashley” and assumes this to be evidence of Sasha’s own affair (183).

Additionally, this conversation takes place seconds after Luke arrives home from a late night at the soup kitchen that ends with him and Corrine kissing against a doorway. Indeed, by venturing to the Hamptons without Ashley, Sasha is physically far away from her daughter, but Luke, who is engaged in a quickly escalating affair and who spends hardly any time at home after the attacks, is distanced from Ashley’s life as well. Only Sasha, however, receives the blame for Ashley’s hospitalization.

After Sasha recommends a rehabilitation clinic for their daughter, Luke further attacks her parenting choices: “Just because your fucked-up friends go there doesn’t mean it’s the best place for Ashley. Maybe we could break the mold just for once and do what’s right for her, instead of what the local narcissists are doing. That’s what got us where we are now” (184).

Here, McInerney leads us to criticize Sasha for her entire lifestyle and to view Luke as the rational, level-headed parent. This characterization of Sasha is in direct opposition to Corrine,

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<sup>6</sup> Ashley is not “left” alone, though, she stays with a friend.

whom he makes out to be an over-involved, over-frantic parent. Of course every parent has his or her flaws, but McInerney does not allow either woman to excel as a mother *despite* their flaws. We see Corrine and Sasha as polar opposites in their mothering roles, but we infer that McInerney does not intend for us to think of either woman as a good mother.

It is important to note that even though the majority of the book is narrated from the perspectives of Corrine and Luke, we get a chapter or two from Russell's point of view. We do not, however, hear anything from Sasha's perspective. Because the central adult characters in the novel make up a square of sorts, with four points each taken by each member of the two couples, we miss out on this essential input from Sasha herself. This absence ensures that Sasha never characterizes herself—we only hear about her through Luke. Even though most of our knowledge of Russell comes from Corrine, we still have the opportunity to get into his head for a handful of pages. Corrine is able to provide many self-deprecating critiques that insist that she is a “bad mother,” so it is unfair to Sasha that her unfavorable character is solely of her husband's construction. Just like the idea of men doing the ‘hard work’ and women remaining passive and caring after 9/11, Luke's words force Sasha's character into submission, and he receives the power to shape the audience's idea of her.

Perhaps Sasha would offer similar critiques of her mothering strategy if she had the opportunity, but she might also give us more insight into her life other than her reputation as a vapid, self-centered socialite who treats her motherly role as a secondary obligation. Our lack of perspective from Sasha, of course, is not our fault as readers—it is the fault of McInerney for not writing it. Maybe he had a reason for withholding Sasha's point of view, such as the arguable belief that she is less important to the plot than Russell. However, without her own perspective, we are left with a depiction of Sasha as an unfaithful wife and an undutiful mother.

Even though *The Good Life* includes several distinctly characterized women in its plot, those women are unfairly held back by the gendered stereotypes and criticisms inflicted upon them. Of course, Corrine's complete relevance to all three dominant categories of 9/11 women—*mother, love interest, and caregiver*—is crucial to both the examination of gender roles following the attacks and to the argument that 9/11 literature as a whole frequently employs these roles in its content. In contrast, Sasha is placed among the common categories of female characters in 9/11 fiction, but with an important nuance: she is not characterized to be the loving, nurturing, grieving wife or mother that most of the other women within the larger genre are. As I move into the discussion of the remaining works of 9/11 fiction, I will continue to demonstrate how, like Corrine and Sasha, the female characters in these texts often remain within stereotypical categories that rely on gendered norms.

## ***2. Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close***

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) follows Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old boy who lost his father in the Twin Towers on 9/11. Oskar, an eccentric and intelligent child, finds a key labeled "BLACK" in his parents' closet and convinces himself that it unlocks something that will bring him closer to his deceased dad. He sets off on an extensive and seemingly impossible search for the key's corresponding lock that leads him to the homes of every New Yorker with the last name Black. Safran Foer intertwines Oskar's journey with a series of letters, written by his grandparents, that tell the stories of their lives and the history of the Schell family. These letters create a depth to the characters within the novel, allowing readers to have a better understanding of Oskar and his continuing attempt to process 9/11 and the death

of his beloved father. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, which was also made into a feature film in 2011<sup>7</sup>, primarily revolves around Oskar and his desperate desire to reconnect with his dad, but in turn, the novel relies upon the women of the Schell family to provide the care and support that Oskar needs to carry out his search.

The novel's two most central female characters are Oskar's mother and his paternal grandmother (simply named Mom and Grandma, respectively). Readers never find out either of their names, which immediately defines each woman by her maternal role. Although Oskar cares deeply about his mother ("protecting her is one of my most important *raisons d'être*"), he feels much closer to Grandma (Safran Foer 68). At one point, for example, he places his grandmother higher than his mother on his list of people who mean the most to him: "3. Mom [...] 2. Grandma [...] 1. Dad" (73). Both women are consistently present throughout the novel, but their processes of characterization are quite different. Grandma is arguably one of the most complex female characters in the entirety of 9/11 literature because of the rich history provided by her letters to Oskar. Mom, however, does not have room to develop much beyond her roles as Oskar's *mother* and as a grieving 9/11 widow (*love interest*). Because the novel focuses on the Schell family history, of which Mom is only a part of by marriage, her past is mostly ignored. Not only that, but her role as a mother limits several of her immediate personal desires. In the following section, I will examine both the male-dominated nature of Oskar's mission and the ways in which Safran Foer characterizes Mom and Grandma as women.

Oskar rarely interacts with Mom or Grandma outside either of the two women's separate apartments. He begins his search for the key on his own, but he eventually carries it out with male companions: Mr. Black, a neighbor who joins him on his residence visits, and Grandpa,

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<sup>7</sup> *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Dir. Stephen Daldry. Warner Bros., 2011.

who meets with him to make plans and eventually dig up the grave of Oskar's dad. The various accomplices who help Oskar along the way, such as Stan, the doorman, and Gerald, the limo driver, are almost always male as well. Oskar's desire to preserve his relationship with his father drives his mission, and the mentorship of older paternal figures, such as Mr. Black and Grandpa, facilitates it. The absence of women in the physical execution of Oskar's search suggests that such a complicated and unorthodox mission must only be carried out by men.

Throughout the novel, readers become suspicious as to why Oskar's mother is not more concerned about her nine-year-old son's safety and long absences as he runs around New York City by himself every weekend. Oskar often wonders why Mom does not question his behavior ("Why didn't she ask me more? Why didn't she try to stop me, or at least keep me safe?") and fears that she is apathetic to his well-being ("Why hadn't Mom said anything? Or done anything? Or cared at all?") (288, 291). However, toward the end of the novel, we learn that Oskar's mother is responsible for the general smooth sailing of Oskar's mission: "They knew I was coming. Mom had talked to all of them before I had" (291). After accidentally speaking on the phone with one of Oskar's interviewees toward the beginning of his search, Mom calls ahead to every New York Black in order to ensure that they expect Oskar's visit. Oskar even suspects that his mother orchestrated Mr. Black's involvement in his journey, assuming, "She probably told him to go around with me, and keep me company, and keep me safe" (291). Oskar seems shocked by his revelation that his search "was a play that Mom had written, and she knew the ending when I was at the beginning," but he reacts with neither extreme anger nor extreme gratitude; in fact, it is difficult to pin any sort of emotion to his reaction at all (290). If anything, Oskar seems relieved that his mother was not oblivious and apathetic toward his behavior and that instead, she was closely involved the whole time.

Mom's close connection with Oskar's search proves her deep understanding of her son's endeavors as well as her unconditional care for him and his feelings. Her unplanned phone conversation with Abby Black alerts Mom to Oskar's search for the key, but in order to contact all of the people on Oskar's list, she must have put serious thought into Oskar's methodology. For instance, Oskar never told Abby that he planned to question every New Yorker with the last name Black, so Mom had to figure out who else he planned to visit and where that list of people might be. Not only did Mom have to determine this logistical information, but she also had to consider how Oskar came across the key and why he felt that it would somehow connect him to his father. Additionally, by calling ahead to arrange Oskar's visits, Mom ensures that the Blacks know his story and his intentions, therefore preventing them from refusing to engage with him. She knows about Oskar's desire to feel connected to his father and that this mission will help him achieve that, but she also knows that too much resistance along the way will discourage and damage him. This profound understanding of her son's thought process and emotional state reveals that rather than being disconnected from Oskar, Mom is deeply in tune with his personality. Because of this orchestration, Mom's contribution to Oskar's journey is essential, but she still does not participate in it in any physical way that might offer an opportunity for mother and son to work through their pain together.

Rather than remaining at home all day, we know that Oskar's mother has a job. This fact, however, is a source of tension between mother and son. Oskar does not seem to appreciate the fact that Mom works, and he remains hurt that she was not at home when he was released early from school on September 11th: "“Why weren't you at home?” ‘Because I have to go to work.’ ‘Why didn't you pick me up from school like the other moms?’ ‘Oskar, I came home as soon as I could...’ ‘But you should have been home when I got home’” (169). This exchange suggests that

Oskar feels abandoned or forgotten about by his mother, even though she clearly expresses that it “wasn’t possible” for her to arrive home any earlier due to the distance between her workplace and the apartment (169). Oskar seems mature enough to understand the need for his mother to work (especially with his father gone), but he still lashes out at her for doing what she must do in order to financially support them both. This critique of a working mother by her own son problematically suggests that Mom is not being a good mother to Oskar, when in fact, she is making their lifestyle possible while attempting to juggle her own grief and responsibilities as a newly single parent.

Furthermore, Oskar’s stark opposition to the idea of his mother spending any time with Ron, her new male companion, also prevents Mom from exercising her own forms of mourning and therapy. She continually insists that Ron is only a friend whom she met while in a “group for people that have lost family,” and that they “help each other” (315, 171). Oskar, who sees Ron as a poor replacement for his father and a sign that Mom might feel happiness instead of grief, demands of his mother, “Either promise me you’ll never fall in love again, or I’m going to stop loving you” (171). Hypothetically, Mom’s agreement to prioritize the wishes of her grieving son would come with the sacrifice of her own romantic future or desire for partnership. As a mother, however, she would not be able to imagine doing anything that would cause her to lose the love and respect of her own son. Even though Oskar’s grief and anger obviously have the better of him, he attempts to cut off his own mother’s agency and ability to “find ways to be happy” (171). At simply nine years old, Oskar, a man, tries to take control of his mother’s relationships with other men. If Mom actually were to make this promise, the ‘duty’ of motherhood would confine her to her maternal role and force her to give up any personal desires for happiness. If she were to refuse, readers would see her as a bad, selfish mother who put her own interests in front of her

son's wishes. There is no ideal way for Mom to escape Oskar's proposed promise.

As it turns out, she does not have to address Oskar's demand, because their exchange continues as follows:

'You're not being fair.' 'I don't have to be fair! I'm your son!' She let out an enormous breath and said, 'You remind me so much of Dad.' And then I said something that I wasn't planning on saying, and didn't even want to say. As it came out of my mouth, I was ashamed that it was mixed with any of Dad's cells that I might have inhaled when we went to visit Ground Zero. 'If I could have chosen, I would have chosen you!' (171)

This remark brings about the most difficult moments of the mother/son relationship that we see in the entire novel. A comment such as, "If I could have chosen, I would have chosen you!" is undoubtedly painful for a mother to hear from her son, even when she knows that it comes from extreme grief (171). After promptly attempting to apologize, Oskar asks Mom if she is still mad at him. She responds, "I was never mad at you," to which Oskar asks, "What were you?" (172). All she says is, "Hurt" (172).

Although both mother and son suffer from their loss of the same person, they continue to have a difficult time sharing and working through their similar grief. Oskar has trouble understanding that his mother can simultaneously mourn and attempt to reclaim happiness. To Oskar, any sign of his mother's contentment is an insult to his father. He awakens her from her sleep one night, thinking, "If she had been dreaming something happy, I would have been angry at her for dreaming something happy" (107). As mature readers, we can understand or simply recognize young Oskar's difficulty with accepting the fact that life without his father must go on. However, the lack of his father leads Oskar to create a strain between himself and his mother that has no easy resolution. Oskar and Mom do not dislike or distrust each other, but their relationship is plagued by the simple fact that Oskar's mother is not Oskar's father.

Clearly, Oskar regrets making a comment as hurtful as “I would have chosen you!”, but he gives readers no evidence that such a sentiment is false (171). He says, “I take it back,” but he does not necessarily say or imply that he did not mean it (172). Oskar is hurt and angry that he has lost his dad, and even though he loves his mother, she cannot fill that fatherly void. He treats his mother as less valuable than the gap that his father left (again, on Oskar’s list: “3. *Mom* [...] 2. *Grandma* [...] 1. *Dad*”) and seems uninterested in actively repairing his relationship with her (73). In the simplest of terms, Mom, a woman, is not as good as Dad, a man.

Differently, Oskar is often more open and enthusiastic around his grandmother. Grandma plays a substantial role in Oskar’s daily life, especially since the two endearingly use a pair of walkie-talkies to communicate across the street that separates their two apartments. A great deal of the novel is comprised of letters from the past that were written by Oskar’s grandmother or grandfather. Sometimes these letters are for Oskar, and sometimes they are addressed to his father. Thanks to these letters, readers learn a tremendous amount of information about Oskar’s grandparents, including what brought them together and what broke them apart. The letters detail the war-torn experiences of Grandma and Grandpa as adolescents in Dresden, Germany, as well as their reconnection and agreement to marry in New York seven years later.

The letters allow for a complex and expansive characterization of Grandma that other 9/11 novels rarely offer to women. Because Grandma is the author of her letters, she is able to tell her story from her own perspective without interference from others. This opportunity for total self-presentation (as opposed to characterization through the perspectives of men) is rare among female 9/11 characters. Although Grandma’s story is told at her own will, the events within that story do not necessarily reflect total female agency at every stage of her life; the

variety and intensity of her life experiences have both enhanced and damaged her character<sup>8</sup>. In one letter addressed to Oskar, she writes, “I can tell you these things because I am not ashamed of them, because I learned from them. And I trust you to understand me. You are the only one I trust, Oskar” (84). Grandma’s refusal to be “ashamed” of her life and her willingness to disclose such personal stories demonstrates both her ownership of her experience and her contentment with herself as an individual. One particularly compelling recollection of events within Grandma’s letters is her experience with her pregnancy. I will focus on this part of Grandma’s story in order to discuss and analyze a significant component of her character’s complexity.

In a letter to Oskar, Grandma recalls a crucial decision that she and Grandpa made before they agreed to marry:

He took his pen and wrote on the next and last page, No children.  
That was our first rule.  
I understand, I told him in English.  
We never used German again.  
The next day, your grandfather and I were married. (85)

Grandma would go on to break that agreement, noting:

One morning I awoke and understood the hole in the middle of me. I realized that I could compromise my life, but not life after me. I couldn’t explain it. The need came before explanations. It was not out of weakness that I made it happen, but it was not out of strength either. It was out of need. I needed a child. I tried to hide it from him. I tried to wait to tell him until it was too late to do anything about it. It was the ultimate secret. Life. I kept it safe inside me. I took it around. (177)

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<sup>8</sup> In one of her letters to Oskar, Grandma writes, “I regret that it takes a life to learn how to live, Oskar. Because if I were able to live my life again, I would do things differently” (184). Grandma’s intense and sometimes traumatic life has provided her with a wealth of wisdom that she is able to share with her grandson. That wisdom, however, is a result of damaging events and experiences that she regrets and wishes to change. She is a wiser, stronger character because of the nature of her life, but those benefits come with an array of detrimental memories as well.

Even though Grandma was essentially forbidden by Grandpa to have children, she recognizes her pressing desire to do so and makes it happen. By exerting her own agency to ensure that she becomes pregnant without waiting for the permission or blessing from her husband, Grandma is in control of her own body and activity. Instead of thoughtlessly being placed into the role of a mother, Grandma claims that role for herself out of her own passionate “need” for a child.

When Grandma tells Grandpa about her pregnancy, he makes a plan to leave her. She attempts to explain her decision to him in the middle of an airport: “I got tired, I told him. Not worn out, but worn through. Like one of those wives who wakes up one morning and says I can’t bake any more bread” (180). Grandma describes herself as being “not worn out, but worn through,” which has quite an ideological connection to Betty Friedan’s identification of “the problem that has no name” among American women (Friedan 180). In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan writes:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?” (1)

Of course, Grandma is not a suburban wife nor is she yet a mother at this point in the novel. However, Grandma’s version of asking, “Is this all?” comes when she claims, “One morning I awoke and understood the hole in the middle of me” (77). The “hole” is her lack of a child and her “problem that has no name” is her subsequent feeling that she lacks fulfillment in her current life. Importantly, Friedan never gives a singular, strict definition for this ‘problem’. Instead, she allows the problem to be flexible to the situation of each woman to whom it applies. In

Grandma's case, rather than defying the call for motherhood, the "problem that has no name" alerts Grandma of her need for motherhood.

When Grandma compares herself to "one of those wives who wakes up one morning and says I can't bake any more bread," she alludes to the frustration of the housewife (one of the American women that Friedan describes, perhaps) who is allowed very little ambition or desire outside of her familial duties (180). This sharp-witted comparison shows the extent to which Grandma has familiarized herself with American culture, and more importantly, suggests that she cannot go on with her daily activities without finding a new avenue of fulfillment: her pregnancy.

Unlike the women of Friedan's work who exemplify the stereotype of the "suburban housewife," Grandma, at the beginning of her pregnancy, is an immigrant woman in Manhattan with no children and an unconventional marriage—she is married to a man who only communicates by writing. The contrasts between these women do not disqualify Friedan's work from applying to Grandma's life, though. Grandma's 'problem' does not lie in the hands of an endless cycle of housework or the stay-at-home mother lifestyle. She is not pinned down by the obligations of raising several children nor is she desperate to have time to herself. Instead, Grandma places a twist on the backbone of Friedan's work by demonstrating how the fight for a child can be the fight for fulfillment. Rather than work against the demand for motherhood, Grandma actively chases it. This independent and personally passionate decision is feminist in nature because it embraces, without outside pressure, what Grandma wants out of her life as a woman.

Overall, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* largely confines Mom and Grandma to gender stereotypes, but both women are at least allowed to find ways to challenge those roles.

Although Mom and Grandma rarely interact with Oskar outside of the house, the women establish their own intimate involvement in his life: Mom with her orchestration of Oskar's search and Grandma with the close guidance that she provides to him. Grandma's emergence as an especially complex character (due to the sharing of her rich personal history) helps to further challenge such gender roles. Still, Oskar's extensive search for the mysterious key is undoubtedly male-driven, as is the novel's overall sense of profound discovery. Due to this lack of female involvement, the novel suggests the idea that women are useful for caretaking and emotional support, but that they are unnecessary in a journey such as Oskar's. Much like *The Good Life, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* limits women to maternal and nurturing roles instead of allowing them to be protagonists that propel the story without constantly performing gendered tasks.

### **3. *Windows on the World***

In *Windows on the World* (2003), Frédéric Beigbeder, a French novelist, tells the story of a father, Carthew Yorston, and his two sons, Jerry and David, trapped in the famous restaurant at the top of the North Tower in the World Trade Center on 9/11. The novel, which Beigbeder breaks down not by numbered chapters, but by the minutes that pass as the attack unfolds, features the voices of several narrators: Carthew, both young boys, and a fictionalized version of Beigbeder that is derived from (but not fully representative of) the author himself. Carthew, Jerry, and David describe the agonizing circumstances they endure as well as their personal reactions to their situation, whereas Beigbeder attempts to unpack many of the personal and political implications of terror as he writes his book between Paris and New York. The novel's narration by four different men establishes a masculine tone from the very beginning, and as the

two intertwining stories progress, the near-complete lack of physical female presence complements this male-dominated presentation of 9/11.

Because Carthew and Beigbeder, as the novel's central adult characters, direct the presentation of women within the story, it is important to briefly examine the connection between these two men. In *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009), Kristiaan Versluys analyzes a handful of 9/11 novels and offers critical commentary on the issues that each text presents. Versluys argues, "[*Windows on the World*] presents itself as a semiotic hall of mirrors in which shards of knowledge and snippets of experience bounce off one another" (Versluys 122). Perhaps the dualism presented by Carthew and Beigbeder can best be described as a type of mirror. It is true that the characters of Carthew and Beigbeder often reflect each other as they ponder their thoughts and urges, but Versluys specifies that "the two main characters are each other's doubles without being each other's alter egos" (134). This complex connection (or doubling, as Versluys suggests), becomes especially clear as readers begin to understand the disturbingly similar views of women that Carthew and Beigbeder both hold throughout their own portions of *Windows on the World*.

Within the narrative of the father and the two sons trapped in the restaurant, Carthew emerges as a questionable character who does not hold high opinions of women. Because of his thoughts and actions, *Windows on the World* provides easily distinguishable examples of all three central categories of women in 9/11 literature: *mother*, *love interest*, and *caregiver*. Carthew's ex-wife and new girlfriend, two of the women who are most frequently referred to throughout the novel, are not at all physically present in the story's action. Right away, these two women solely exist in *Windows on the World* in an inferior way that perfectly places them into two of the three categories of 9/11 women: the *mother* and the *love interest*. His ex-wife, Mary,

only appears over the phone in frantic and rare opportunities of communication during the attack, desperately wondering about the well-being of her children. In fact, Carthew's harsh antagonization of Mary manifests itself even in what should be the most sentimental of moments: his phone conversation with her after the plane has struck. Over the phone, Mary screams, "Oh Lord, tell me this isn't happening. Carthew, don't tell me you're up there!" to which he responds, "Shit, you're the one who told me to get the kids up early so they didn't get out of their school routine! I'd rather be somewhere else, I swear" (Beigbeder 69). Despite every unpredictable circumstance of the morning of 9/11, Carthew blames *Mary* for the fact that he and the boys are trapped in the famous restaurant. Such an immature, irrational accusation displays his misogynistic attitude and contempt toward his ex-wife at a fragile time when she is terrified about the fate of her own children.

Throughout the novel, Carthew frequently mentions that the reason he left Mary was so that he could have the freedom to sleep with as many different women as he wanted: "Strangely, money is the reason I left her: I couldn't keep going home when I had all that dough burning a hole in my pocket. What was the point of earning all that money if I was going to be stuck with the same woman every night?" (46). This materialistic reasoning for a divorce is quite self-centered in nature, and does not give consideration to Mary's feelings or needs. As far as Carthew is concerned, however, his marriage held him back from ideal lifestyle as a womanizer, and he makes no effort to hide that fact:

I wanted to say 'Fuck you' to middle-class ideas of the perfect family: that a man shouldn't leave the mother of his children even if he's in love with another woman, that if he does, he's a bastard, an asshole with no sense of responsibility. A 'sense of responsibility' clearly meaning cheating on your wife without her finding out (196).

Of course, divorce is not an uncommon nor highly taboo legal activity, and it is not my goal to suggest that Carthew and Mary should have sustained their marriage despite their issues.

Carthew, however, treats his ex-wife with an unfair amount of contempt considering that *he* is the one that left her due to his desire for infidelity. Because Mary does not narrate nor even appear in the novel, she does not have the opportunity to defend herself or tell her half of the story. Sour comments such as, “Jerry and David wind me up, but they have something over their mother; at least I still love them,” only reinforce Carthew’s lack of regard for Mary as an individual woman after their divorce (20-1).

Additionally, Carthew alludes to Candace, his relatively new girlfriend, as an object of constant desire and attraction throughout his contemplative narration. We only learn about Candace’s appearance rather than her personality; Carthew introduces her with details like, “She makes J. Lo look like a bag lady,” and “Candace did a photo shoot for Victoria’s Secret—I mention it just to give you an idea of how hot she is” (4, 31). Toward the beginning of the novel, before the plane even strikes the tower, Carthew admits, “But things aren’t going too well between us: she wants us to get married, have a baby, live together, and these are precisely the three mistakes that I want to avoid making again” (31). Divorce has obviously turned Carthew off from commitment to a life with another woman, but his implication that having his kids was a mistake is quite unsettling. He seems to reevaluate that refusal, however, as the severity of the situation unfolds. When Carthew finally manages to leave Candace a phone message, he says, “It doesn’t look good, babe. I’ve been such a fool. If we get out of here, I’m going to marry you. I have to hang up because I need to try to breathe for the three of us. Love you. Carthew” (76).

Later, when the inevitability of death becomes more apparent, Carthew again admits, “I should have married Candace so she could be a beautiful widow” (212). Here, he still remains

fixated on her appearance rather than a variety of other benefits that marriage might have brought, such as her financial security or personal fulfillment. For Carthew to express regret for what he *should* have done is commendable, but that regret still does not let Candace exist as a character with personal agency. Her status as Carthew's love interest allows Carthew to have important epiphanies and revelations as he comes closer and closer to death, but ties her entire identity to her relationship with him rather than allowing her to exist as an independent character.

Despite these scattered mentions of women with whom Carthew is or has been involved, there are two women whose presences are consistent throughout the story. One of them, only called "the blonde in Ralph Lauren," is a guest at the restaurant during the attacks, along with her counterpart, "the guy in Kenneth Cole." Carthew believes the two are having an affair ("You don't need to be a P.I. to work out they're lovers. Would you take your wife to breakfast at the top of the World Trade Center?") and eavesdrops on their conversation, which switches between talk of the stock market and plans for the guy in Kenneth Cole to leave his wife (21). Even though Carthew and his sons never socialize with the couple, he recounts their conversations sporadically as the tragic morning unfolds. Consistent with Carthew's obsession with female appearances rather than personhood, he regards the woman by her features ("the blonde") and the man by his manhood ("the guy"). Like the men recounting the service of Officer Moira Smith in *102 Minutes* and *September 11: An Oral History*, Carthew allows a female feature such as hair color to become a woman's primary identifying trait. Although the blonde in Ralph Lauren and the guy in Kenneth Cole are not crucially involved in the narrative of Carthew, Jerry, and David, their presence is a reflection of Carthew's crisis of desire between his thrilling new relationship and the life he abandoned by leaving his wife.

The other woman who is continually present in the story is Lourdes, an employee at the restaurant whom Carthew initially describes as “the cubby Puerto Rican waitress” (88). He quickly utilizes her to assist with his panicked children: “I ask Lourdes to look after them, giving her a wink so she’ll play along” (94). She willingly entertains and keeps an eye on the boys while Carthew ventures off with the other men, usually in search of an escape, and she does her best to comfort them. Here, Lourdes fulfills the third role of a literary 9/11 woman: the *caregiver*. Carthew even reflects on her role, claiming “The woman is a saint,” in reference to her helpful presence and heartbreakingly hopeful attitude (196). In general, the instant bonding between Lourdes, Carthew, and the boys is sentimental in its display of companionship during crisis. Her characterization as a savior full of maternal and emotional support, however, aligns perfectly with widespread post-9/11 expectations of women.

Even when seven-year-old David is allowed to narrate a chapter, he says, “Lourdes is really nice with us, but she cries nonstop, it’s a real bummer” (128). Her emotion is bothersome to him, and he, like his father, thinks that they are all better off if she remains the “saint” that they perceive her to be. Not only does this statement erase Lourdes’s need to express emotion, but it also alludes to a classic sexist trope: that men are rational while women are emotional. Of course, not all men within the novel are rational—Jeffrey, for example, is “completely out of it,” according to David—but as the only woman with whom Carthew and his sons are closely involved, Lourdes is automatically associated with an overt display of emotion (128). It is also worth noting that David spends most of his narrative space naively characterizing his father as a superhero who will wait until the right moment to unleash his powers and save the day (133-4). David’s understanding of the different ways in which the two adults will take care of him—

Lourdes by being “nice” and his father by becoming a superhero—even manages to reflect the gendered characterizations that are present throughout the novel.

At one point, after Carthew has left Lourdes with the kids for the first time, she says, “...just because I’m black doesn’t mean you can assume I’m their nanny, OK?” (101). Lourdes might as well have added “and because I’m a woman” into her remark—she is fully aware of Carthew’s assumptions about her caretaking capabilities because of her gender and her race. Carthew’s less-than-profound response, “But, uh...no, of course n--,” does not quite recognize his subconscious assumptions about her, and he continues to ask her to watch the children as he goes off with the other men in search of help (101). Despite Lourdes’s motion to stand up for herself, she does not refuse to take care of the children, nor does she seem bothered by doing so. In fact, Carthew tells us, “She never managed to have children [...] that’s why she wants to help with Jerry and David” (196). Even though Lourdes is not an actual mother, the novel still manages to thrust a motherly role and sensibility upon her. Her willingness to care for Jerry and David as if they were her own children is admirable, but the method by which her care is enlisted by Carthew—a default assumption that a woman would be willing to provide care—is unfortunate and riddled with gender stereotyping. Carthew essentially uses Lourdes as a babysitter who enables him to take action like a rescuer rather than performing his own paternal duties.

The very assumption that Carthew, a man, is incapable of caring and providing for his own children is negatively gendered. Carthew makes several references throughout the novel to his shortcomings as a father and as a provider of care to his kids. He feels guilt for leaving them via his divorce (“I deliberately chose to desert my own flesh and blood. These two brats were holding me back”) and mentions that he feels a general lack of closeness to them (“I always feel

weird when I see my kids. I'd like to be able to say 'I love you,' but it's too late") (196, 24).

When the plane initially hits the tower, Carthew even admits, "I'd like to tell you my first thought was for Jerry and David, but it wasn't. I didn't instinctively try to protect them. When I dived under the table, I wasn't thinking of anyone except little old me" (54). Such an action can easily make readers dislike or distrust Carthew, but it also reveals that his characterization as a father is gendered to the point that he is not even allowed to succeed in protecting his children during their time of need. This characterization reflects the alternative side to gendered stereotyping that unfairly prevents men from engaging with the more tender, domestic parts of their lives that are typically reserved for women. It is crucial to remember that gender roles do not solely hurt women—they have a negative effect on men as well.

Judith Butler addresses the relationship between men and rigid gender roles in *Gender Trouble*: "If it is possible to speak of a 'man' with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a 'man' with a feminine attribute, whatever that is, but still to maintain the integrity of the gender" (Butler 33). Although the capability for compassion and care of children is not something that should be exclusive to one gender, Carthew is characterized as too masculine to perform such tasks. According to Butler, however, if good parenting is Carthew's "feminine attribute," he should be able to maintain his valued masculinity. Had Beigbender allowed Carthew to succeed as an instinctively protective father, Carthew would be no less of a man—the 'integrity of [his] gender' would go unchanged. Carthew's character is a perfect example of why the concept of masculinity must also be considered in the study of gender roles.

Between Mary, Candace, and Lourdes, all women of limited presence, *Windows on the World* contains clear examples of the three central gendered categories of 9/11 literary women:

*mother, love interest, and caregiver.* The novel's negative attitude toward women, however, is not limited to the portions that take place in the midst of the 9/11 attacks—the fictionalized version of Beigbeder does not manage to present women in any more positive of a light. At times, Beigbeder's narration seems strange, disconnected, and self-indulgent—his numerous accounts of his failures in his personal life, for example, seem out of place in a novel so explicitly about 9/11. His negative presentation of women, however, is undeniable, so his half of the text must be taken into account. To be clear, in the following few paragraphs, when I mention “Beigbeder,” I refer to the novel's characterized version of Beigbeder, not the author himself.

At the very beginning of the novel, Beigbeder lists his favorite American writers, musicians, and film directors in an effort to convey how much he admires and respects American creative work. He lists 21 writers, 16 musicians, and 15 film directors, but every single one of them is a man (17). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Beigbeder's perception of women is very narrow—he obviously does not think highly of them as professionals and as creators of culture and ideas. Instead, Beigbeder's idea of women is similar to Carthew's in that both men think of women as interchangeable objects of desire. Beigbeder fails to recognize women as individual people; he sees them as a single entity that should be treated as such. He continuously spouts insulting, objectifying descriptions of women: “You're not buying a girl, but a dream. Eye candy,” and, “You never know if the girl you'll wind up with will be pretty or ugly. And I'm not drunk enough to fuck ugly” (210, 211). These types of comments, combined with his complete disregard for the individual personhoods of women, set an off-putting, misogynistic tone for the entirety of his narration.

As Beigbeder wanders through New York questioning why his fiancée has left him, he makes sexist comments like, “The women had won: no one wanted to grow old with them

anymore” (270). By characterizing the entire female gender as a rival group that somehow works against men, he leads us to assume that deep down, he sees women as an enemy. Beigbeder continues, “I saw married men as eunuchs and prisoners. I thought: you’re not a man unless you fuck a different women every day” (270). Here, not only does his suggestion that men are “prisoners” to women advance his idea of women as an enemy, but he also presents a harmful understanding of masculinity that relies on his perceived interchangeability of women.

Perhaps Beigbeder’s most troubling characterization of women comes in the midst of his time in New York:

These are the people the fanatical Muslims are scared of, and I can understand why. They scare me shitless too, with their heavy artillery: mascara, lip gloss, oriental perfumes, silk lingerie. They’ve declared war on me. They terrify me because something tells me that I’ll never be able to seduce them all (183-4).

He equates physical tokens of femininity (“mascara, lip gloss, oriental perfumes, silk lingerie”) with battle artillery, suggesting that women do not utilize their methods of feminine expression for themselves, but rather as a form of weaponry (183-4). Furthermore, Beigbeder clearly has an issue with the idea that he is not “able to seduce them all,” but his assumption that he *should* be able to do such a thing reveals his troubling sense of entitlement to women (184). His statement that women have “declared war” on him reveals his internalized belief that women should exist to please men—he feels threatened and wronged by women who are attractive yet unavailable or uninterested (184). Here, his sense of entitlement shows up again: by likening the existence of desirable women to the act of war, Beigbeder reveals his immature inability to handle the concept of rejection. Not only is Beigbeder’s flawed understanding of women heavily misogynistic, but it also trivializes the severity of the 9/11 attacks. Beigbeder both blames women for anti-American sentiment (“These are the people the fanatical Muslims are scared of”)

and ignores the real extremism that led the so-called “fanatical Muslims” to plan the acts of terrorism (183). It is disturbing to see an objectively intelligent character like Beigbeder make such a callous and misinformed statement, no matter how facetious he imagined his words to be.

Much like the real-world post-9/11 tendency to place little value on the contributions and capabilities of women, Beigbeder’s misogynistic thoughts regard women as sexualized objects that possess no purpose other than to be desirable in the eyes of men such as himself. Even though Beigbeder himself is not directly involved with the events of 9/11 in the way that Carthew, Jerry, and David are, his heavy presence in the book is equally as important in the establishment of the novel’s tone, especially in comparison to other works of 9/11 literature. Versluys offers a blunt outlook on the novel, saying, “In many ways, it is a shallow book. As its two protagonists are forever sounding off and as their thoughts often lack perspicacity, the novel demonstrates that great events do not necessarily produce great thoughts” (121). Although this statement likely refers to the 9/11-related content within *Windows on the World*, I believe that it can also address the novel’s gender dynamics and problematic treatment of women. Thus, Carthew and Beigbeder indeed display a lack of ‘great thoughts’ that includes not just their reflections on 9/11 as a crucial event, but also their condemnable attitudes toward women with whom they are involved. Because of these blatantly misogynistic central characters, readers cannot engage with *Windows on the World* simply for its commentary on 9/11 without being distracted by the novel’s anti-feminist, and as Versluys says, shallow tone.

#### **4. *After***

In her 2004 novel *After*, first-time novelist Claire Tristram tells the story of a short but intense sexual affair between a Muslim man and a woman whose husband was recently killed in an act of Islamic extremism. The novel never directly addresses 9/11, but it references many

corresponding societal reactions: reluctance to fly on the first year anniversary, widespread Islamophobic attitudes, and the general fear of emergency. Thus, its date of publishing and relevant subject matter place it well within the discourse of 9/11 literature. The woman and the man, simply referred to as “the widow” and “the Muslim,” meet at a trade show at which the widow is an actress. Later, much to his surprise, she calls him to plan a rendezvous for a night—the night that is the anniversary of her husband’s death. When they meet at their chosen hotel, the pair seems awkward and unsure of how to proceed, and when they finally make love, the widow is oddly passive and unresponsive. As their time together unfolds, though, the widow’s desire to use their liaison as a twisted mechanism of grief and revenge escalates their sexual behavior into a combination of violence, torture, and sadness.

When I examine *After*, I am most interested in the complicated interactions between the ideas of roles and control. Tristram uses the context of post-9/11 gender roles to explore the fluctuation of dominance between the man and the woman, and she does so by playing with the extents to which the Muslim and the widow feel masculine and feminine. Even though the affair only lasts for one night, the characters both engage with and reject stereotypes of gender and power. By alternating the novel’s narration between the widow and the Muslim, Tristram offers insight into each character’s evolving roles and perceptions of their relationship, therefore making *After* an essential text to the study of women in 9/11 literature.

Unlike the other 9/11 novels that I have previously discussed in this thesis, the widow’s roles as a woman do not just exist in her private sphere: they extend into the public sphere as well. She is not a mother, nor is she responsible for the care of anyone. She is, however, a *love interest* who is defined by her previous relationship to a man, but engaged in a new unclear and unofficial relationship with the Muslim. The widow is not just any widow, either: the wide press

circulation of her husband's death makes her *the* widow. She describes "the peculiar situation in which she found herself: a young widow in a country full of people who wanted to help her" (Tristram 25). After the death of her husband, she becomes a public persona and a figure that Americans adopt as a symbol of their own grief. The Muslim recalls what he remembers of the media frenzy that surrounded her: "I saw the pictures. A picture of you making a speech. You were shaking hands with the governor [...] You were on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* last winter" (68). It would be impossible, it seems, to live in America and to be unfamiliar with the widow and her husband's story. Her role as a widow, therefore, is not the product of her private grief and self-definition after such a tragic event; it is a role thrust upon her by the American public, who, despite their generally good intentions, appropriate her as a symbol of national unity.

Susan Faludi's 2007 book, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, examines the landscape of the American national response to 9/11. By considering images and representations of both femininity and masculinity following 9/11, Faludi illuminates the sexist double standards and gender roles that quickly became ingrained into the post-traumatic American rhetoric of patriotism and hero-worship. Faludi pays particular attention to the public fascination and *celebritization* of 9/11 widows in the period following the attacks: "The women who received the most airtime were the ones who contributed the most to their husbands' posthumous elevation, both by lauding the men's valor and displaying their own vulnerability" (Faludi 94). *After's* widow spent a year in this public light becoming a bit of national celebrity. The Muslim recalls skimming through a magazine to find "her face, her name, a photo of her standing at a microphone surrounded by people holding candles. Her face was apricot-colored, lit by the candlelight and the inner glow of stoic bravery" (20). The very notion that the widow

must radiate bravery plays into the public desire for displays of vulnerability, like Faludi notes. By applauding bravery, the media suggests that the widow should be scared by the idea of living without her husband. Of course she is devastated by his death, but instead of encouraging the idea that she is still strong without him, the public longs to be moved by her new vulnerability and her 'brave' willingness to continue life as a woman without a man.

Despite her lack of motherhood, the media desperately tries to fit the widow into this public role, and for the most part, she complies. In the public eye, she could only be more admirable if she were able to perform the patriotic task of raising children in the image of their dead father and with American ideals in their hearts. Privately, however, the widow is not one of the "models of all-American housewifery" who are required to "devote themselves to their families and the memory of their dead husbands" (Faludi 93). Frankly, her desire to take a Muslim man as her new lover is in direct opposition to the public's desire to celebrate their vision of a grieving, wholesome American housewife. This complicated position between expectation and desire arguably makes the widow the most compelling female character in 9/11 literature. By combining the pressure of public duty with the necessity of private grief, Claire Tristram characterizes the widow as a complex woman dealing with the gendered implications of post-9/11 America while trying to seek her own, albeit immoral, form of therapy.

Even though the widow occasionally displays cynicism toward the idea of her public role, she does not reject the label of "widow" within her private life. Consider this exchange between the Muslim and the widow after their unsettling dinner experience:

'There was a moment there in the restaurant when I looked at you, and I felt that I could see you for who you really are. Not American. Not a widow. Not even female. But an individual, strong and lovely.'

'But I am a widow. I am a woman. What can you be saying? What can you possibly be saying?'

'Just that we don't have to think of one another in such a limited way.'

[...]

‘You are a Muslim. I am the widow of a Jew. That is who I am’ (132-33).

In this context, the Muslim’s suggestion that the widow is “Not American. Not a widow. Not even female” comes off as both condescending and disingenuous (132). By erasing her identifications as a female, American widow, the Muslim leaves the widow with nothing else with which to define herself. She does not want to just be an ‘individual’; she wants to embody those classifications because she does not feel much of an identity without them. Here, the widow has a private opportunity to reject the roles that have been so forcefully pushed upon her, but she instead hangs on to them. It is unfortunate that such a tragic event provides the basis for such a central part of the widow’s identification, but her reclamation of that identity puts her in control of her self-presentation. She embraces her identity as an American widowed woman not as a negative, limiting categorization, but as a reality that will guide her mentality as she moves forward, even if her actions are questionable.

The exploration of the widow’s role as a woman and the Muslim’s role as a man begins when she phones him to suggest and plan their one-night rendezvous, and it lasts through the entirety of their sexual liaison. By initiating their night together with a “breathlessly indiscreet” phone call, the widow both recognizes and acts upon her desire—she does not wait to be invited somewhere by somebody else’s will (21). Plus, the odd fact that the widow initiates this affair with a Muslim man, given the context of her late husband’s death, suggests that her motives are quite intentional. The idea of doing “something so unexpected, so clearly outside the role that she had been forced into by her circumstances” exhilarates her, and the sense of control that she gains from this action remains close to her throughout the rest of the novel (29). A more stereotypical dynamic between a heterosexual couple might feature a man in control of a passive

woman who agrees to his wishes, but *After* showcases a reversal of those roles and that possession of control.

Furthermore, the widow feels that the violence inflicted upon her husband by his killers has taken control of her life, and she feels an uneasy desire to find a way to reclaim that control:

‘I have terrible thoughts. For the longest time I’ve wanted to hurt a man of your sort.’

[...]

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Because of your husband.’

‘I think so. Because of the way we were. Because of what happened.’

‘And now?’

‘I think so,’ she said. ‘To be in control. To see how it feels’ (134).

Not only does this admission reveal some of the darkest motives behind the widow’s treatment of the Muslim, but it also explains her desperate desire for control. At this point, she still does not feel fully confident in her fantasy (“I’ve never done anything like that before [...] Not until this very moment did I ever allow myself to imagine it), but she begins to think of her desire to hurt the Muslim as a real possibility (134). The widow understands the power to hurt (or kill) as the possession of control, but given the nature of her relationship with this particular Muslim man, she uses violent sexual exploits as her version of dominance. Despite the immorality of her actions, the widow defies any notion that women should not feel sexual desire or that they should lack control of the directions of their sexual relationships with men.

Her level of control, however, shifts as the Muslim fluctuates between passivity and assertiveness. Earlier in the day, when they first make love, the Muslim notices, “She was merely passive, giving him permission to do with her what he would. Her passivity filled him with nearly unbearable desire to violate her” (61). Here, he craves control: his desire to “violate” her is violent, concerning, and, as we later learn, a precursor to what the widow will soon do to him.

That night, after the widow openly admits her growing desire to hurt a Muslim man, she rejects the idea of being controlled any longer: the Muslim asks, “So do you want me to fuck you now?” to which she replies, “No. I want you to close your eyes” (141). She insists that from now on, she will give the directions, but she also reveals that “his obedience frightened her” (142). As a woman, perhaps she is not used to the unquestioned obedience of men, so her sudden switch into a position of greater power comes with newfound anxieties. The widow’s fright, however, does not stop once she accepts his obedience: she begins to scare herself with her own actions as she continues to make her strange preparations for their next, more violent sexual exploit. As she begins to bind the Muslim’s ankles and wrists, the widow is “terrified at the depth of her capacity to be cruel, now that she had been given permission” (145). Rather than being scared by the Muslim, she is scared by her own capability and desire to achieve the level of cruelty to which her husband fell victim. This confession of fear, though, calls into question her definition of control: if her subject consents to her forcefulness, does she really have control? Or, differently, does control require her total domination against the wishes of her subject, like the terrorists had over her husband?

Perhaps an even greater question about the embodiments and displays of femininity and masculinity arises from this prolonged sexual scene. Confused by both the widow’s questionable intentions and his own intense arousal, the Muslim is “alarmed and startled and wholly unprepared for the passive way the rest of him accepted her desire to dominate him” (149). The Muslim’s uncertainty seems equally due to his concerns about his own safety and his concerns about retaining his masculinity while allowing a woman to dominate him in a sexual setting. Perhaps because his initial dominance over her passive body makes him feel so masculine, this reversal of roles makes him feel subjugated into the assumedly lesser position of a woman.

Compared to the novel's first sex scene, when the widow grants the Muslim dominance over her lifeless and limp body, this change in the dynamics of control represents a total swap of passivity and assumed gender roles.

In her 2012 dissertation, Jenn Brandt argues, "In attempting to reenact the horror of her husband's death through intercourse, the widow not only appropriates a masculine identity, but in doing so, becomes a 'terrorist' herself as she binds, tortures, and sodomizes the Muslim" (Brandt 154). This masculine identity is fundamentally related to the control that the widow retains as she makes the Muslim a victim of her most violent desires. During this time, not only is her physical position one that is typically assigned to a man, but her words and forcefulness are also reminiscent of male-associated power.

The widow commands him,  
 'Say, 'I like this.'  
 'I like this.'  
 'Tell me not to stop.'  
 'Don't stop.'  
 'What do you feel?'  
 A pause.  
 'Like a woman,' he said (160).

The widow does not force the Muslim to equate his current position to that of a woman, nor does she even suggest it. Instead, because of her verbal control and the way she touches him, he understands that the widow has made it her goal to make him feel the weakness so often associated with womanhood. Brandt elaborates, "Tristram's masculinization of the widow and feminization of the Muslim serve as a commentary on the nostalgic return to traditional gender roles endorsed by the American media in the wake of September 11, 2001" (154-5). As I argue in my discussions of the previous novels, this revitalization of gender roles promoted a masculine duty to protect and control as well as a feminine duty to care and comfort. By

reversing this ideology and embodying the antithesis of her assigned persona, the widow rejects the calling to be a passive and gentle woman and instead fulfills her desire for control. She feels powerful and dominant in this new role: “This is what men think when they make love to us, she thought. What I feel now. Wanting to hurt her, invade her, to rip her apart. And my lover’s only purpose is to allow it” (160). Here, the widow equates her masculine sense of control with violence and the Muslim’s subordinate passivity with femininity, completing her successful (yet unsettling) reversal of gendered stereotypes. These gender roles are further complicated by the insulting Islamophobia with which the Muslim must deal in post-9/11 America. He reflects, “Overnight he had lost his mystery and his aura of the forbidden and had become bland, unattractive, sexless” (18). This demeaning racism threatens the Muslim’s personal sense of masculinity, and the widow’s sexual domination over him deepens this feeling.

In the process of the “feminization of the Muslim,” as Brandt suggests, I argue that the widow also intends to turn the Muslim into a hypothetical widow by damaging his own marriage (154). She orders the Muslim to repeat her husband’s last words into a voicemail message to his wife: “Darling. Honey. Hon. I don’t know when we’ll see each other again. I love you. Always remember that, no matter what happens” (164-5). The Muslim’s wife, who believes he is on a business trip, will later receive the confounding message and become terrified for his safety. He dreads her reaction to the message, assuming, “she would hear this other woman with him, and there would be tears and consequences” (167). After listening to the Muslim deliver the message, the widow simply says, “Now you understand me” (166). This haunting declaration confirms her intention to make the Muslim feel the loss of his wife, just as she experienced the loss of her husband. The widow believes that by feminizing the Muslim and destroying his marriage, she has at last made them equals.

Now, I must address the relationship that Tristram's own femininity might have to her development of such a complex female character. The authors of the previous works which I have discussed are all male<sup>9</sup>, and I attribute much of their problematic and stereotypical representations of women to this fact. That is not to say that men cannot write compelling female characters, but rather to suggest that as men, these authors were not as bothered by and inclined to address the gendered cultural behavior that followed 9/11. Tristram never makes a blatant condemnation of this societal process, but rather uses the widow as a mechanism to explore the different ways in which women were delegated to passive, inferior cultural positions after the attacks. In a footnote within her text, Brandt notices, "Tristram chooses not to capitalize the 'w' in widow, which demonstrates the subordinated nature of her label, as she is not only referred to in relation to her husband, but her 'name' is not even capitalized" (154). Despite the widow's acceptance of her status as a widow, she is still treated as nothing more than that: we never learn her name, and when she is recognized in public, she is merely called "the fucking widow on TV" (119).

In a 2004 interview with *Slow Trains*, a literary journal, Tristram says, "Even when I'm washing dishes or sleeping or tying my shoes it feels like I'm inhabiting a character in my story. It feels as if everything that happens to me is related to what I'm writing and it all pours itself into the words I'm writing" ("The Slow Trains Ten"). As an adult woman on September 11, 2001, perhaps Tristram was a keen observer of the post-traumatic enforcement of gender roles. Her discomfort with this trend might have transformed into a desire to write about it, especially since she insists that her own experience informs her writing. I know that I cannot measure

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<sup>9</sup> Dean E. Murphy, *September 11: An Oral History* (2002), Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn, *102 Minutes* (2005), Jay McInerney, *The Good Life* (2006), Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), and Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World* (2003).

Tristram's innermost reaction to post-9/11 culture, but the commentary that she offers in *After*—commentary on both the delegation of gender roles and the general subordination of women—in addition to her commitment to highlighting the experience of a woman rather than a man, sets her apart from her male peers who have also tackled 9/11 as a literary subject.

Despite these interesting ways in which Tristram's identity as a female author might give insight to the novel, *After* is first and foremost a crucial text within 9/11 literature because it addresses the complexities of gender, race, and religion in a post-9/11 American society. Even though the widow and the Muslim serve as an isolated representation of the much larger American public, they alone are able to demonstrate the tokenization of 9/11 widows, the Islamophobic attitude toward Muslim Americans, and the differences that so quickly divided people following the attacks. Tristram offers no objectively 'good' character, which is essential to the novel's power. By suggesting that neither a victim of the attacks via widowhood nor a victim of the attacks via xenophobia can be a perfect moral example after a period of such distress, *After* reminds readers of the impossibility of capturing an entire nation's grief in any singular way.

#### **PART IV: CONCLUSION**

Rather than call for new forms of 9/11 media that reject the erasure of women, the aim of this thesis has been to analyze the existing representations of women in 9/11 literature. By conducting analysis of both non-fictional and fictional 9/11 texts, I have provided evidence of how representations of women in these works are composed of gendered complexities.

In my examination of 9/11 nonfiction texts, I discussed how central female players in the 9/11 rescue efforts were often described by male civilians and colleagues in gendered ways that

called the men's faith in female authoritative officials into question. The two women whose stories I focused on, Major Janet Deltuva (in *September 11: An Oral History*) and Officer Moira Smith (in *September 11: An Oral History* and *102 Minutes*) displayed the utmost courage and commitment that could have been asked of any public official. Despite that, male storytellers in the texts still commented on the features of Officer Smith's hair before praising her efforts. Differently, Major Deltuva was allowed to tell her story in the stereotypically male-centered realm of rescue work. Outside of the stories of Officer Smith and Major Deltuva, the majority of both nonfiction works mention women as either recipients of final phone calls from their endangered husbands or widows left with children to raise alone. These gendered representations, of course, reminds us of the characterizations of women throughout works of 9/11 fiction.

Perhaps more importantly, I have demonstrated how women's issues in 9/11 novels are closely related to the issues unpacked in the works of feminist theorists from the last century. Although Susan Faludi and Judith Butler are feminist thinkers of more recent times, the applicability of the words of Betty Friedan to the problematic representations of women in these texts written in the last 15 years is astounding. Not only does this relationship between old and new texts draw historical connections, but it also reminds us that as a society, we are not immune to repeating behavioral practices that we thought we had eradicated, such as post-traumatic gender roles. Despite the vastly different plots of *The Good Life*, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, *Windows on the World*, and *After*, the representations of women among all four novels are remarkably similar. With the help of the categories of *mother*, *love interest*, and *caregiver*, I observed that women are allowed very narrow identities in 9/11 literature, and that their places within each novel are almost always established by their relationships to male characters.

What, then, do these observations about works of 9/11 literature contribute to how we think about the world? The 9/11 attacks were not the first tragic events in United States history, and they certainly will not be the last. As the American public, including both those directly affected and those stunned from sidelines, mourns and recovers from trauma, we must remember that all people, regardless of gender, have a place in responsive discourse, whether on a national scale or within private families. I began this thesis with Susan Faludi's findings about the lack of inclusion of women in the popular media's response to 9/11. Now, I want to urge that the predominantly inferior roles given to women in 9/11 novels like *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Windows on the World*, in addition to the deep effects of gender roles on female characters in *The Good Life* and *After*, are due to the real-world normalization of patriarchal standards in the way that we address trauma as a nation.

Because literature is a crucial part of national and worldwide culture, it is necessary to analyze it for clues about how we operate as an American society. By noticing both the gendered depictions of women and the dominance of male writers in the realm of 9/11 non-fictional and fictional texts, we can conclude that 9/11 literature captures the specific gender norms present in the United States following the momentous and unforgettable terrorists attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

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