

**Failure to Construct a Meaningful Border for Democracy in E. L. Doctorow's: *The book of Daniel***Zohreh Ramin<sup>1</sup>, Seyyed Mohammad Marandi<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>. Assistan Professor, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran<sup>1</sup>.<sup>2</sup>. Associate Professor of English Language and Literature, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran<sup>2</sup>[zramin@ut.ac.ir](mailto:zramin@ut.ac.ir)

**Abstract:** In his *Reporting the Universe*, a book of non-fiction, Doctorow, like many other Western writers, represents his orientalist mode of thought as he divides societies into two broad categories: countries, mainly Eastern, which are governed by a religious ruler, whose system of governance is an "absolutist theocracy" and in which the people are fanatic, religious, and backward-minded. According to Doctorow, the absolutist theocracy in such countries have safeguarded their power by suppressing freedom of expression, hence a hindrance to the outburst of multiplicity of voices and actions, regarded as a threat to the state. On the other hand, Western countries, specifically America, which are not governed by absolutist theocracy and have accepted the fact that holy texts have been communally redacted, have, according to this view, blessed their countries with the gift of freedom of expression and multiplicity, hence opening space for emergence of contradictory ideas, never claiming perfection. However, the ironical point in Doctorow is between what he claims in his nonfictional work and what he proves in his novels. His major novels reveal the impossibility of evolution and change, as the outcome of this so called democracy is nothing but degeneration, lack of justice and impracticality of freedom. With regard to Doctorow's stance towards American democracy and focusing on *The Book of Daniel*, the present paper aims to show the impossibility and impracticality of Doctorow's claims regarding the American democratic system. While Doctorow believes America is governed by a democratic system which can evolve, his novels, which deal with the American past, delineate a bleak and dark picture of this democratic society in which no evolution is observable and history is the continual repetition of human tragedy.

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**Introduction**

Doctorow inaugurated his writing career at a time when America was experiencing a major disillusionment in the political and social sphere. His writing vocation began with the publication of his first novel *Welcome to Hard Times* in 1960. This was a time in which metafiction was gaining widespread popularity as a literary technique. However, the ambience of cynicism, characteristic of the political and social context of the 1960s, is by no means confined to his first novel. The spirit of disparagement and disillusionment towards social and political issues which found its way into Doctorow's first novel is later extended to cover his entire oeuvre.

Doctorow's writings can be studied as instances of Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction" since Doctorow is not only concerned about the past but his novels demonstrate his concern on how that past has been constructed and has affected the construction of the identity and culture of the American nation. Praising the novelist's heterogeneity, Douglas Fowler has observed Doctorow's construction of history: "E. L. Doctorow is a remarkable phenomenon among contemporary

American novelists: a serious writer who is also popular; a political writer who is also a stylist, an original writer who is highly eclectic; a historical writer who invents the past" (8). It comes as no surprise then, that although Doctorow sets his novels in specific, often critical, historical contexts, yet his novels deviate from traditional nineteenth-century realist history novels.

Despite the variety in content, historical setting and narrative character and voice, almost all the novels employ metafiction to some extent. Doctorow's novels are paradoxically unique and similar, radical and conservative, postmodern and modern. But there develops a certain undeniable consistency, surfacing in his first novel and continuing down to his last. Concentrating on *The Book of Daniel*, the present paper aims to uncover the paradoxical nature of the novel and Doctorow's possible intention.

**Why *The Book of Daniel*?**

*The Book of Daniel* is set in the 60s but anticipates the earlier 30s, 40s and 50s, and attempts to capture the transitional phase from the Old Left to the New Left, concentrating on communism and

radicalism. The content of the book is based on the controversial case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the American-Jewish communist couple who were convicted and executed in 1953 for conspiracy to commit espionage during a time of war. They were charged for passing information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. This was the first execution of civilians charged with espionage in United States history and has remained controversial ever since. Since the truth of the Rosenberg case and their role as spies has been enigmatic, it served as an appropriate subject for Doctorow's book, at least at the time when he was writing the novel.

Doctorow's major emphasis in the novel is on the impossibility of knowing the truth about the past. This is best reflected in his depiction of the narrator of the book, Daniel Isaacson, the imaginary son of the Rosenberg couple, who undertakes a quest to know the truth about his family history. However, the only thing Daniel can finally come to acknowledge is how illusive history is: "Of one thing we are sure. Everything is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is elusive. Justice is elusive." (*The Book of Daniel*, 54)

The book consists of four sections "Memorial Day," "Halloween," "Starfish," and "Christmas." After their parents' execution, Daniel and his sister Susan are adopted by lower-class liberals. Set in 1967, when Daniel is 25, the time of the novel is one of social and political upheavals due to the popular counter-cultural movement of the time and the rise to popularity of the New Left. To come up with a better understanding about himself, Daniel tries to understand his family history. He is also writing his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University during this time of great political instability. Daniel uses different narratorial devices and describes his childhood before his parents' arrest, the time they were held in prison, their execution and his own as well as his sisters' life after their parents' execution. It is through his narration that we learn of his sisters' plight and attempt at suicide and her ultimate death and his own attempt at understanding the truth about his parents' past.

Although the narrative is set in 1967, the time continually shifts as Daniel's mind roams over the past. The narrative's shift in time places two specific times alongside each other for the reader to ponder over; the Old Left of the 1940s and 1950s, or his parents' world, and the New Left of the 1960s which is Daniel's own time and age. Within this historical context, Doctorow embarks on creating a fictive account of the real life Rosenbergs.

Daniel begins his highly self-conscious story, which is also his PhD dissertation, by commenting on his writing, shifting constantly in

time and point of view, and disrupting the narrative's chronological order by providing historical and analytical passages. Like Blue, the narrator of *Welcome to Hard Times*, Daniel is highly self-conscious of himself as a writer. The novel contains many self-reflexive elements in the form of monologues "The way to start may be," "how would I get this scene to record?...how do I establish sympathy?"(16) and dialogues directed to the reader "A NOTE TO THE READER"(66) or "Who are you anyway? Who told you you could read this? Is nothing sacred?"(72)

*The book of Daniel* is a significant departure from Doctorow's earlier work in terms of style. Unlike the western *Welcome to Hard Times* and the science fiction *Big as Life*, which were innovative employments of popular fictional modes, *The Book of Daniel* challenges the reader's expectation through shattering the narrative line, and fragmenting the single narrative voice through providing a multiplicity of viewpoints from which the story is narrated. Daniel is on a quest of discovery but this discovery is twofold. Not only is he seeking a family history but he is also attempting to write a PhD dissertation. Like Blue he attempts to find his voice and come to an understanding of his own personality at the same time.

Doctorow believes that all texts, including historical ones, are fictional and any attempt to find the border between the two is futile.

Citing the original history of the novel, Doctorow notes that early novelists including Defoe and Cervantes presented their writings as "histories", as "false documents". Doctorow's major tenet towards history is that it is always composed and that historians are narrators. (24)

According to Harter and Thompson, for Doctorow, discovery rather than statement is important; "searching is very much the issue. Thus, much of the author's energy at the book's outset and, indeed, throughout, goes into the creation of Daniel as artist figure." Harter and Thompson believe that the continual shifts in point of view in the book enhance the main issue of "searching" rather than coming up with answers and solutions. Daniel's ultimate awareness, they claim, is that the world and ultimately the self are fragmented and a fragmented narrative which continually shifts in time and point of view has been the best way to reflect this.

However, what Doctorow is reflecting in the narrative is his fluctuating political convictions which have been translated from an outside observance of social and political matters to a narrative which is an incarnation his dualistic attitude towards the left and radicals.

The Narrative of *The Book of Daniel* is loaded with functionality. That Doctorow is critical of the American judicial system stands at the forefront in the novel. Doctorow does not attempt to solve the problem of the Rosengebrg/Issacson case since this is virtually impossible. By recreating the story of the trial and the execution of the couple, seen mainly from the eyes of their imaginary orphaned son and occasionally their daughter, the narrative stimulates the sympathy of the reader toward the children, and provokes hatred and disgust at the injustice and prejudice lying at the heart of the American system.

To draw forth the sympathy of the reader, involving him/her in the process of attempting to locate the truth while confronting a malicious and unjust government, Doctorow has been very scruple concerning the dominant narrative voice. This explains why having started writing the book primarily in an entirely third person point of view, Doctorow then discarded the hundred and fifty pages he had already written, realizing it had to be "Daniels's voice" as he wrote the book anew. Daniel and Susan are very disturbed children and the devastating impact of the execution of their parents represents the disturbed condition of the age.

#### **Cutting both ways: the illusion of extremism**

That Doctorow combines fact and fiction in his narratives reflects his playful approach to history and narrative as a means through which he can approach both sides of his argument.

By reconstructing history, he highlights the shortcomings and problems of the American political system of administration which encourages individuals to be self-centered, voracious and racist. Since Doctorow employs a postmodern style in this book, discussing Doctorow's indictment of one side of the argument would not do justice to the narrative content and personal attitude of the author.

Although all his novels reflect a harsh and violent criticism of capitalism, yet Doctorow seems to be skeptical of an alternative system which would compensate the deficiencies and shortcomings of what he primarily sets out to impeach.

Many critics including John G. Parks have referred to the postmodern, even polyphonic nature of Doctorow's fiction; "In Doctorow, dialogue or polyphonic fiction is both disruptive or even subversive of regimes of power, and restorative of neglected or forgotten or unheard voices in the culture" ("The Politics of Polyphony" 455). According to Parks, Doctorow challenges the power of the regime with the power of freedom. However, the major focus of this paper is to demonstrate that even as he challenges the power of the regime,

Doctorow likewise challenges the possibility of freedom and escape from that regime.

#### **The illusions of the truth and the left**

*The Book of Daniel* is Doctorow's open condemnation of injustice in the American government, reflected through the story of a family history told by Daniel Rosenberg. Daniel recalls his childhood when his father had educated him on how to look differently at advertisements, arousing at a very early age in the child a critical and analytical mode of thinking "He worked on me to counteract the bad influence of my culture... Did I ever wonder why my radio programs had commercials? He'd find me reading the back of my cereal box at breakfast and break the ad down and show what it appealed to, how it was intended to make me believe something that wasn't - that eating the cereal would make me an athlete (42). This analytical mode of thinking remains with Daniel in his adulthood, and becomes the grounds by which he tries to find the truth of his parents' case.

In this novel, Doctorow deviates from traditional modes of storytelling. One such mode is shifts in time. The novel covers less than a year, from Memorial Day in 1967 to the spring of 1968, when Columbia University is closed down by radical demonstrators and Daniel is forced to leave the library. The novel moves both in place and time. Spatially, the novel begins from Massachusetts to New York to Washington DC, to Disneyland and back to New York. Temporally, the novel moves in and out of various times including the Red Decade of the 1930s, the courtship of Daniels' parents, scenes from his childhood in the 1940s, and various other historical periods. However, by vacillating between the Old left of the time of the Issacsons and the New Left, at the time of Daniel, Doctorow does not intend to indict the American system of government by offering the Left as a savior for the American nation. Doctorow's metafictional narrative shatters both sides of the argument, conservative and radical.

In the figure of the Issacson couple, Doctorow embodies the failure of the Old American Left. The communist party which the Issacsons gave up their lives for disclaimed them on their arrest. It was only once they found they were being propagated as martyrs that they were reclaimed. The failure of the New Left is best demonstrated in Daniel's encounter with Artie Sternlicht. Artie analyzes and criticizes the Old Left; "The American Communist Party set the Left back fifty years. I think they worked for the FBI" (166). However Artie is not aware of the limitations of the New Left, which is symbolically depicted in the mural on the walls of his home which says; "EVERYTHING THAT CAME

BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME"(151). Stephan Cooper observes this statement as a disregard and neglect of history. (Cooper 117). In fact using the words of Eagleton, the Leftist critique of a totalizing view of history, is itself complicit with its own critique: by observing the past as unitary, the New Left will have problems analyzing the present. Artie is also suffering from the same misconception the Issacson's experienced: like them he believes the New Left is the vanguard of a new movement.

Daniel is well aware of the impracticality of the Left, Old and New. Through Daniel, Doctorow has represented his disappointment and disbelief in the possibility of change. The juxtaposition of two scenes from the novel can highlight Daniel and Doctorow's disbelief: In 1940, the Issacson's along with many other families decide to attend a lecture by Paul Robeson, an American concert singer, recording artist, athlete and actor who became noted for his political radicalism and activism in the civil rights movement. On the way, their bus is viciously attacked by a crowd who yell out offensive anti-Semitic and racial insults.

Many years later, Daniel is severely beaten in an anti-war march. But Unlike the optimistic youthful New Leftists including Artie, Daniel's bitter personal experience has left him pessimistic of any possibility for change. He is aware of the strong power of the establishment, which suppresses any possibility for change and this is why his attitude in the anti-war march is different from other protestors, observing their naiveté in expressing joy at being jailed.

Doctorow's skepticism and disbelief in the practicality of the Left is also reflected in fictive character of Susan. Daniel and Susan are both fictive descendents of the real Rosenbergs. Both are mentally devastated by the death of their parents at a very early age but according to Parks "Daniel and Susan Lewin-Issacson are the casualties of history. Each copes with this experience of trauma and loss differently"(40). While Daniel prefers to take his time, pondering and analyzing matters related to the death of their parents, searching for the truth, Susan is a desperate activist who has no doubt in their parents' innocence. If Daniel is the analytically minded brother, contemplating and analyzing issues, Susan is the practical radical. Unlike Daniel, she is certain of their parents' innocence and strongly inclined to act on their behalf. Daniel prefers to be a passive recipient; he cannot believe in their parents' innocence unless he is offered some "truth" or "proof".

And yet Susan, the radical child, dies, while Daniel, who is only stirred to action after fourteen years, decides to set out on the quest for retrieving

the truth. Doctorow has constructed the plot in such a way that the rebellious Susan is finally silenced while Daniel, the passive brother, survives. Daniel's view about his parents differed greatly from Susan's, who preferred to idealize them. For Daniel, they were not central to the Left; in fact Daniel finds their roles were mistakenly magnified by themselves and the US government. But for Susan, they were martyrs.

That Daniel fails to discover anything new or any proof about the past, is Doctorow's intention in demonstrating the ultimate failure and impracticality of leftist or broadly speaking subversive contemplation. Doctorow's indictment of the Left then is reflected not only through Daniel's failed attempt at recovering truth but his excessive contemplation over issues.

Doctorow indicts Daniel's and on a much broader plane, deconstructive modes of thinking which attempt to plunge deep into abstract matters and issues, guided by intense analysis and inquiry but are impotent at fulfilling practicality. Not only does he delineate the problems of the new left and radical's in the content of the novel, he also demonstrates symbolically through the character of Daniel the impossibility of postmodern and deconstructive modes of narrative in guiding thinkers to an ultimate resolution which can alleviate tensions.

The polyphonic structure of the narrative opens up a locus for Daniel to temporarily ponder over the possibility of recovering the truth of his parents' case. His self-conscious mode of writing and shifts in time and point of view can be observed as safety-valves, like a carnival for a temporary subversion of the hierarchies, but only temporary, for ultimately, Daniel needs to return to his regular life and join mainstream culture.

Although the novel initially sets out to challenge and subvert the American regime of injustice and inequality, the challenge of hegemony fails in this novel on two major planes, symbolically figured in the character of Daniel and Susan. Through Daniel's analytical mind, Doctorow wishes to open up new horizons of thinking which deviate from mainstream beliefs and ideas. From this vantage point, new possibilities and truths are supposed to emerge, as the result of subverting previously held ideas and beliefs. However, Daniel's deconstructive mode of thinking reflected in his self-conscious narration yields no ultimate teleology regarding his parents' case. In practice also such modes of thinking fail as Susan, who has a strong faith in the Left is silenced through death. Ultimately, theory and practice yield no satisfactory ends as they are both ridden with faults and drawbacks.

**Double removal from reality**

Doctorow is among those writers who employs deconstruction as an application and practice, with specific interest in American history. The application of deconstruction in this sense with Doctorow as with many other American scholars accordingly becomes political, "because of its deployment at the site of a specific historical conflict." (Clayton, 54) As such, Doctorow's double-sided practice finally does not result in a radical change. But then what does Doctorow finally achieve?

As already discussed, if Doctorow's fiction shows instances of subversions, this is either only transitory or not portentous to the state. Any action in the novel which appears to be an uprising against the state, or in the form of escape from tyranny and oppression, is finally suppressed. Any instance of subversion is a safety-valve for the unheard voices. At the end, although new perspectives have been offered, everything is restored to its original status.

In his most important non-fictional book *Reporting the Universe* (2003), Doctorow has outspokenly represented his political interests. These political interests can be traced throughout nearly all his novels. At the end of a chapter entitled "Apprehending Reality", Doctorow states; "We are indebted as Americans to an underlying civil religion that accounts for the exceptionalism we claim as a nation. A civil society can evolve. A theocracy cannot." (110) A writer, no matter how impersonal he intends to be, cannot help but frame his narratives with his own personal beliefs, making it impossible to be an objective writer. And since Doctorow believes in the evolving capacity of his civil society, he has no hesitation in reflecting this perception in his fiction.

Throughout the novel, we follow Daniel as he proceeds with his quest for his family history, engaging in complex analytical thought. Nevertheless, at the end he comes full circle back to his starting point. Although his quest may have taught him many things about himself and the deficiencies of the state, he also learns of the deficiencies of the New Left just the same. Nor does his plight for the truth finally lead him to an absolutely stable position of knowledge. So like *Welcome to Hard Times*, the novel's cyclic structure represents the cyclic structure of history and the impossibility of escape from it.

Unlike the claim of many critics, Doctorow is very conservative in this novel. His silencing of Susan, Daniel's rebellious sister, at a very early age reflects symbolically his distrust at such extreme skeptical way of thinking. Rather than political action, Daniel prefers analysis. Susan wants to

establish a foundation in the name of her parents to redeem the past but Daniel's motives are ambiguous since unlike Susan, he is not certain of his parents' innocence. But neither is he successful in fulfilling his desire for truth.

Perhaps the most outstanding section of the novel which is of particular relevance to our argument is the last part of the novel; "Christmas." This includes Daniel's trip to Disneyland, the place where he can meet Sleig Mindish, the friend and neighbor who had betrayed his parents and who remained the only possible gateway to knowing the truth. Doctorow has quite wittily closed the book by culminating Daniel's quest for truth in a location which is a symbol of illusion, constructed by the American system. Of course Disneyland plays an important part in the novel, a symbol of what America has been built upon and how influential it has been in constructing and maintaining the American culture and identity.

The park consists of five divisions; Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, Adventureland, and Main Street USA. Doctorow's political intention in this part is voiced through Daniel; "What Disneyland proposes is a technique of abbreviated shorthand culture for the masses, a mindless thrill, like an electric shock that insists at the same time on the recipient's rich psychic relation to his country's history and language and literature." (305)

At Disneyland, Daniel confronts what William Irving Thompson has described as "the edge of history" because once there, he experiences being in a place where "past and future come together to shatter the prevailing order of society". Disneyland is a world where everything is built on myth and fairytale, reinforcing the motif of fakeness and betrayal. It is a replica of all the tales and stories which are themselves mere mythical construction, recalling Plato's notion of the shadow on the cave as being doubly removed from reality. Consequently, it is especially ironical that Daniel's quest for truth has ultimately ended in this place which rather than being a gateway to the truth of history, is a doubly-removed version of truth. To exacerbate matters, Mindish, who is supposedly the only person who can relieve Daniel of this burden, is incapable of telling him the truth about his parents due to his senility. So the novel ends where it began; the Issacson case remains open and Daniel never manages to learn the truth of his parents' involvement in the espionage.

Doctorow is well aware of the manipulative power of the state which is why he has chosen to end the novel in this particular location. Disneyland manipulates the public by providing for them a "synthetic identity" (Harter and Thompson 44) and a

composed history. The closing of the novel at this point reinforces the impossibility of knowing the truth and the power of the system to control the lives of individuals. What is ultimately left of the Issacson radicals is a son whose quest for knowing the truth has remained hampered. The system is too powerful to be challenged, even if that challenge is a mere quest for truth.

Daniel's failure can be juxtaposed with the strength of the system in creating myths, symbolically represented in Disneyland, and offering them as popular truths and reality to the nation. The search for truth in such a system can only result in a double-removal from reality.

Daniel's narrative continually shifts between two timelines, that of the old and the new left. There is no progression in the end because the basis of the novel is constructed on the conception of Daniel's limitation in knowing. The novel ends where it began, leaving Daniel and his provisional understanding about his family untouched and his mind still full of unanswered questions about the truth of his parents' case. The New Left will inescapably end where the old Left ended; the acceptance of the status quo.

The novel has depicted the power of the system in controlling the lives of individuals, for the entire plight and confusion of Daniel and the premature death of Susan is due to the decisions of the American juridical system. However, as Doctorow demonstrates, there is no alternative as this system will continue to govern and direct the lives of future generations of Americans, through the "fairytale" versions of truth they "construct" for their nation through other Disneylands. The ultimate conclusion Doctorow's conservative narrative can lead Daniel to is the acceptance of the status quo.

### Conclusion

*The Book of Daniel*, a work published during the turbulent years of the counter-culture movement, coincides with the emergence of the then-new techniques of subversive narrative construction. Though the novel may appear to be indicting the American judicial system through highlighting the controversial Rosenberg case, yet Doctorow's ultimate stance towards the case appears to be ambivalent.

Although Doctorow appears to be upholding radicalism and liberalism, yet a closer scrutiny of the novel proves otherwise. Initially, Doctorow sets out to break the frames of traditional realist historical fiction by merging the border between fact and fiction. But just as this frame-breaking does not intend to bestow superiority to fiction over fact, nor does it favor a radical, rebellious and entirely

subversive attitude. As demonstrated in this research, Doctorow takes an equally criticizing approach towards leftist, radical and rebellious actions and characters.

Considering Doctorow's statement regarding the success and possibility of evolution in a civil society, one cannot help but observe that Doctorow's ambivalent political stance in this novel reflects his failure to uphold his optimistic attitude towards the success of democracy and its capacity to precipitate progress.

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