

# *The Book of Daniel: Exposure and Criticism of Political Violence*

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**Abstract**—E. L. Doctorow's historical novel *The Book of Daniel* (1971), by using trauma narrative, from the perspective of the political Left wing, combining memory with imagination and mixing history with fiction, reconstructs the tragic historical story of Daniel's parents who were electrocuted for treason by the state in the 1950s, exposes and criticizes the political violence as the root of trauma imposed upon the younger generation from that tragedy.

**Key Words**—*The Book of Daniel*; trauma narrative; political violence

## INTRODUCTION

Violence as a philosophical concept is a drastic and compelling force and it usually indicates the set-tos and murders between individuals or criminal groups owing to all kinds of contradictions, for example, the conflicts of interest.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, violent events may also break out between countries or nations because of the conflicts such as political, economic, military, ideological, religious contradictions and territory entanglements that are hard to conciliate. Likewise, the formation of power also tends to use violent menace to compel the opposite side to submit. Political violence refers to the activity that the doers, out of certain special political purposes, actualize some organized material forces aiming at the governed, threaten and injure the selves, the others, the groups or the society, and consequently produce some fatal political aftermaths.<sup>3</sup> The action that the despotic regimes bring into effect, by acting against the democratic system and destroying the civil liberty, to abuse the state's power out of political purposes and kill innocent people, is an out and out political violence. In American history, under the influence of McCarthyism and out of its political need during the Cold War in the 1950s, the American state government, by appealing to its political violence, insanely persecuted alleged communists in the US government and other institutions and many politically progressive and democratic forces, and imposed the traumatic heritage upon the younger generation

Wounds include physical ones arousing permanent pathological changes and mental ones resulting in emotional abnormality. Freud thinks that "If an experience, in a very brief period, can make a person receive so high a stimulation that he cannot try for adaptation and consequently cause the distribution of his effective ability to be disturbed perpetually, we call it a traumatic experience"[5.p.217].

Unable to understand the cause and meaning of this traumatic experience, the patient plants this experience deeply in his unconsciousness and cannot cast off the impact of the traumatic experience. In 1953, the American state government, proceeding from its political need during the Cold War, put Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a couple of young scientists, into the electric chair with invented proofs. Inspired by this historical event, in his novel *The Book of Daniel* (1971), E. L. Doctorow, taking Daniel as both protagonist and narrator who is taking part in the changing political struggles in the 1960s, combining memory with imagination and mixing history with fiction, reconstructs the tragic historical story of Daniel's parents, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, who were wrongly electrocuted for treason with fictitious evidences by the state violating the democratic system in the 1950s, and at the same time exposes and criticizes the state's political violence as the root of trauma imposed upon Daniel and Susan, their son and daughter through that tragedy, by using trauma narrative from the perspective of the political Left-wing.

## I. THE UNCERTAIN TRAUMATIC EVENTS

In order to help the victim walk out of trauma and resume his mental health and normal life, the key point of the traumatic narrative is to narrate the traumatic events through the narrator's recollections. The difficulty for Daniel, the protagonist and narrator in *The Book of Daniel*, is to reconstruct the traumatic event that his parents were electrocuted for treason by the state with invented proofs because he did not witness that event or he missed that moment of perception. But he cleverly arranges the moment of perception to emerge repeatedly in the trauma narrative, which makes it possible for him to witness the past event that he did not witness. To be concrete, his traumatic narrative combines a series of problems about treason and the relation between citizens and laws with a series of problems about the unwitnessed events and the traumatic heritage so that it effectively reproduces the traumatic event that the Isaacsons were wrongly executed for treason and powerfully exposes the root of the tragedy—the state's political violence. In the novel, the founding of the United States of America is repeated as the protagonist is forced to misplace it repeatedly and it is also repeated as the violence which Daniel cannot sufficiently distinguish from his own takes place once and again. The novel develops its narrator's thinking about the central scene that the Isaacsons were electrocuted by starting from the reproduction of some uncertain past events that the narrator could not witness. Since postmodernism proposes change and innovation and emphasizes openness and pluralism, the postmodern trauma narrative in the novel *The Book of Daniel* resists the modernist principle to explain and rule the world by using single and unchangeable logic, formula, and universal laws, claims that "it is possible and necessary to break tradition and begin a new mode of life and thought" [7, pp. 265-266], and uses a variety of innovative ways to reconstruct history.

In the novel, very young Daniel follows his parents to Peekskill to listen to a Paul Robeson concert. In fact, part of the concert is a political activity in which some Left-wing persons, making use of this occasion, put forward their political protest against the social injustice in the capitalist society. When he is with his parents

and other Jewish people on a bus, they are attacked by a group of stone-hurling white supremacists. At this moment, Daniel sees his father perform an apparently heroic action: Paul Isaacson, disregarding the pain from the breaking of his arm, struggles to squeeze out of the bus and asks the police to come and protect these people. But this event is recorded by the grown Daniel. If then Daniel huddled together with his mother hiding behind the seats, how could he know so many details such as that, before his arm was broken, his father calmly removed and folded his glasses and handed them to a friend? And how could he know what his father did next? These scenes from reminiscences narrated in the present tense are obviously impossible and they seem to be imagined by the narrator. With this scene as basis in this trauma narrative, Daniel develops his thinking about the central scene—his parents were wrongly electrocuted—which he could not have witnessed. Obviously, the reproduction of such uncertain scenes needs the narrator's combining his recollection with his imagination. Consequently in this way, Daniel becomes a witness to the uncertain past scenes.

In *The Book of Daniel* often appear some descriptions of the scenes which often interrupt the trauma narrative and at the same time highlight and query the position of witnessing. In his childhood when he is playing on his front porch, Daniel happens to see an accident take place: a woman carrying bags of groceries is killed by a car which loses control, rushes on the sidewalk, and bumps into her. Daniel, going across the street, sees that the broken glass, milk and the woman's blood are mixed together [3, p. 145]. This scene seems to be probably real and also imaginary and it is possibly a reconstructed event that happened many years ago from Daniel's memory. It indicates that the central scene that Paul and Rochelle Isaacson were wrongly electrocuted in the trauma narrative does not demand the reader to make a choice between memory and fiction and determine from which the event is reconstructed.

Like Freud's case of a clinical patient in which it is not very important whether the main scene that the patient describes is imaginary or real, in *The Book of Daniel*, for the narrator's thinking about the central scene, it is also not very important whether the central scene of the

Issacson's execution that Daniel narrates is true or imaginary. What is the most important is whether Daniel's identity of a witness to the uncertain historical events can be established. It is certain that in Daniel's trauma narrative about the central scene there is literariness of history. This is because the subject of criticism absolutely cannot come into contact with a so-called all-sided and true history or he cannot experience the consistency of history in his life. History is not a complete piece of iron but something full of blanks that need to be filled and explained [13, p. 185]. As a matter of fact, when the central scene happened, Daniel was a child and it is impossible for him to be allowed to watch the execution. Therefore, Daniel, an outsider of historical events, could not save his parents or be saved by them and even though he dreams to be capable of saving his sister Susan, actually he is afflicted with his inability to act. However, he tells the reader that his parents "didn't go so far as to let me watch them fucking, but I did that too one way or another" [3, p. 41] which analogously explains his situation of being outside of historical events and the possibility for him to be a witness to these events by combining his recollection with his imagination. The novel extends this logic in his trauma narrative and offers the reader a general paradigm for understanding Daniel's troubled relation to action or agency involved. Thus, his identity of a witness to the unwitnessed events has been established.

Because trauma is uncertain in time, having neither the present tense nor a given area in the past, the trauma narrative that manages to link the past with the present, produce meaning and finally find out the root of trauma is not always untruthful but it is a man-made product of the psychoanalytic process. Freud admits that "The path that starts from the analyst's constructions ought to end in the patient's recollection; but it does not always lead so far. Quite often we do not succeed in bringing the patient to recollect what has been repressed. Instead of that, if the analysis is carried out correctly, we produce in him an assured conviction of the truth of the construction which achieves the same therapeutic result as a required memory" [7, pp. 265-266]. Similarly, Daniel narrates that, at the end of *The Book of Daniel*, he goes to the West Coast to investigate the historical facts

concerned with his parents' wronged case of political persecution. In Disneyland — the fabulous dreamland, Daniel interviews his parents' friend Selig Mindish who betrayed them. It is just in this miraculous wonderland that Daniel constructs his "Theory of the Other Couple": there was another couple with two small children who were the real spies. They were Morris and Lona Cohen, two American communists who also had two young children and disappeared when the Rosenbergs were arrested [1, p. 223][10, pp. 10- 12]. Accordingly, it could be inferred that the Issacson's were executed in their place to cover them, the two real spies. Though "other couple" may be or may not be "fragment of historical truth" [7, pp. 267-268], the basis for Daniel's "theory of other couple" reveals that there is another sight that he could not have seen: "When Selig Mindish was called to the stand, my mother sat up in her chair and folded her arms and lifted her head... But before he said the words that put them in their graves he turned and looked for a moment at Rochelle, looking for one fraction of a second into her eyes...and she was stunned to read in it the message not of a betrayer" [3, pp. 295-296]. This unwitnessed sight is described in detail by Daniel because here Daniel's mother is a character in his historical narrative and also a character in Doctorow's fictional narrative as well, which well explains that this sight is reconstructed and the two texts are similarly constructed on the basis of combining memory with imagination.

In this trauma narrative in *The Book of Daniel*, it is just through combining memory with imagination that such unwitnessed events as the mixture of milk and blood, the riot at Peekskill, the drama in the courtroom, and the electrocution of Daniel's parents are all vividly delineated and opened out before the reader. Therefore, these uncertain events effectively support the central scene that seems to be impossible in a historical text. As a historical narrative, *The Book of Daniel* does not demand the reader to judge whether these recollections are true or not since they help the reader understand and accept the postmodernist assumption that fiction and history are similar narrative discourses which cannot be quite differentiated one another. The trauma narrative in the novel indicates that, like Daniel's

impossible recollections or like Doctorow's fictive narrative, even if a real witness to the scene of the Issacson's electrocution cannot offer a complete picture of the event without the help of imagination. Though it tries to return to the historical scene of the so-called espionage crime and electrocution for treason, *The Book of Daniel*, a novel as a sequence of analyses, is not at all "a process of coming back or flashing back" but of "ana-lysing, ana-mnesing" [8, p. 1615]. Thereby, its description of the uncertain past traumatic events and its exposure of the truth of history by combining memory with imagination are quite powerful and convincing.

## II. STATE'S POLITICAL PATERNITY

Early radical feminism, arising within the second-wave feminism in the 1960s, typically viewed patriarchy as a trans-historical phenomenon prior to or deeper than other sources of oppression. Radical feminists assert that their society is a patriarchy in which men are the oppressors of women so that women seek to abolish patriarchy. They also believe that the way to deal with patriarchy and oppression of all kinds is to think about and deal with the underlying causes of these problems through revolution. In politics, the Left-wing writers describe an outlook or specific position that accepts or supports social equality and often opposes to social hierarchy and social inequality. The New Left-wing movement appeared in due form in the 1960s. It is basically a movement with university students as its main body. The students of the New Left wing actively took part in the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, the Feminist Movement, and the Environment Preservation Movement.

It is not fortuitous that Doctorow, a Left-wing postmodernist writer, who witnessed the development of the Feminist Movement in the 20th century, wrote and published his novel *The Book of Daniel* (1971) with Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1971) in the same period. In his novel, Doctorow also shows his concern about the possibility of women's liberation and its relation to the identity of women who struggle for social equality. He uses sex as a metaphor to annotate other things. Susan's words—"They are still fucking us" [3, p. 19]—sound like the slang in that age but they express plural

meaning and important to the narrative of the novel. After the description of Daniel's and Susan's running away from a children's shelter and trying to find their way home, Doctorow provides an inconsistent paragraph: "According to Evans, observers in New Zealand report that mosquitoes there land on the floating pupae of females, slit them open with their genitals, and mate with the females before they can emerge" [3, p. 194]. While observing the picture in this short passage, the reader would naturally link the two situations— young Daniel's and Susan's and the floating pupae of females'—and realize that Susan and Daniel were raped in their childhood, which figuratively means that they, the children of the alleged guilty Issacson's, were ill-treated by the state when they were very young. Here, the sexual violence is used as a metaphor to reveal the political violence in its persecution of the citizens.

Because he cannot adapt himself to and accept the extreme form of life that his parents were put to death by the state when he was very young and he had lost both his father's and mother's love that a child should have, Daniel is fascinated with sexual violence to his wife, which, however, can be understood as a reversal of his early inability to adapt to such a life and which may be a means to overcome his disadvantageous position being limited outside the central historical scene. Between Daniel's history and his sexual violence to his wife, there is a relation full of a complex and plural meaning. Daniel's sexual violence to his wife metaphorically represents his thinking about the central scene—the execution of his parents by the state and it makes the text of the trauma narrative saturated to a great extent. The most important metaphorical meaning of Daniel's sexual violence to his wife is that it equates to "the violent paternal authority of the state" [9, p. 162]. During the Cold War period, for the United States of America, the leader of the camp of Western capitalist countries, the state must frustrate any growing up revolutions, especially one under the socialist influence from USSR, the leader of the camp of Eastern socialist countries. In the novel, Daniel, as the narrator, reveals the American government's antagonistic attitude to Russia and its keeping on guard against any revolutionary activities while describing the first red scare in the United States like this: "Sixteen

bombs were found in the New York Post Office just before May Day. The bombs were addressed to men prominent in American life, including John D. Rockefeller and Attorney General Mitchell Palmer. It is not clear today who was responsible for those bombs—Red terrorists, Black anarchists, or their enemies—but the effect was the same. Other bombs popped off all spring, damaging property, killing and maiming innocent people and the nation responded with an alarm against Reds. It was feared that as in Russia, they were about to take over the state and shove large cocks into everyone's mother. Strike that" [3, p. 34]. In such strained gloomy political atmosphere, Daniel's parents are considered the traitors or the enemies of the United States, so the state should carry out its function of paternity to destroy them. Actually, the state's violent destructive paternity functions as the state's political violence to suppress revolutions.

### III. THE ROOT OF THE TRAUMATIC EVENT

The key method to cure trauma is to help the patient find out the root of trauma so that the trauma will be cured and the patient will resume his normal life. Therefore, the point of the trauma narrative is to determine what has caused the trauma. In *The Book of Daniel*, when he recalls his life during childhood, Daniel sees that the special horror that he felt when his parents were arrested is closely related to the central scene that his parents were electrocuted. Even before his parents were taken away, he was afraid to go to sleep. Daniel consciously analyzes the reason for such situation: "I would lie in the dark and think that I couldn't fall asleep because the minute I did, they (his parents) would leave me and Susan and go somewhere they had never told me about. A secret place. It's the same thing when you catch them fucking, the same terror of exclusion. Flopping about, completely out of control, these people who control you... The world was arranging itself to suit my mother and father...all bodies and objects were secreting the one sentiment that was their Passion, that would take them from me" [3, p. 124]. This passage stresses that, for a very young child like Daniel who is watching and understanding life, his parents are the only people whom he depends on in his life and

therefore what he fears most is that his parents would abandon or betray them. His fear or fantasy that he would be abandoned by his parents has become real when they were arrested, electrocuted by the state and left him forever. Daniel reveals that his parents are helpless in the face of their own passion for love-making but in his trauma narrative his parents' passion is mixed up with his own passion to narrate their tragic historical sacrifice. The trauma narrative in *The Book of Daniel* amalgamates Daniel's parents' sexual desire with the state's political violence and thus indicates that Daniel is the victim of his parents' passion, his parents the victims of the state's political violence and in the final analysis his parents have abandoned or betrayed him because they were put into prison and electrocuted by the state's political violence.

In the trauma narrative, what makes Daniel's history more tragic is that the distinction between what is imaginary and what is real collapses and the distinction between what is interior and what is outside disappears. Daniel painfully tells the reader, "Every moment of my waking life is intensified and I know exactly what is happening... And we will be pinned, like the lady jammed through the schoolyard fence with her blood mixed with the milk and broken bottles. And our blood will hurt as if it had glass in it" [3, p. 101]. Though trauma is often described as a psychological shock or wound and the traumatic event as an intrusion, the text of *The Book of Daniel* implies that a trauma is also the return of one's interior world from outside, which means that the trauma is caused by the outside forces. Therefore, as Morgenstern sternly points out, "One's symptomatic fears and desires belong to the Other: the police (the FBI) and the state (the United States of America)" [9, p. 163]. Once again, the trauma narrative reveals that the trauma that Daniel suffers from is caused by the state's political violence.

Among all kinds of scenes in *The Book of Daniel*, the central scene that Daniel's parents were electrocuted for treason by the state was shown in public, that is, it was watched by many people who intensively demanded justice for the Isaacsons. This picture has become a politicized image full of historical meaning. The execution of the Isaacsons reminds us of an even earlier historical event. On June 27, 1776, from the historical record that declares independence and

presupposes the codification of treason, ordered by General George Washington, Thomas Hickey was judged a traitor and executed to death. According to Bradley Chapin, “Washington had taken a decisive step; action based on loyalty to George III had been interpreted as a heinous crime. By executing Hickey...Washington announced publicly in an irrevocable manner his status as the representative of an independent state” [2, p. 35]. The execution of Hickey for treason on June 27, 1776 was a *de facto* declaration of independence [2, p. 115] which was a weak earlier than the document “The Declaration of Independence” by Thomas Jefferson unanimously agreed at the Conference of the Thirteen United States of America on July 4, 1776. What should be emphasized here is that independence was declared or produced with a citizen’s *death*. Obviously, the Isaacsons’ execution in the 1950s is the displacement of Hickey’s in the 1770s. As Daniel clearly points out, the United States of America establishes its own identity — an independent democratic republic—in a manner of demanding its citizens’ death: “The final existential condition is citizenship. EVERY man is the enemy of his own country. EVERY MAN IS THE ENEMY OF HIS OWN COUNTRY. ...All citizens are soldiers. All Governments stand ready to commit their citizens to death in the interest of their government” [3, p. 85]. The novel implies that one would once again witness a new state to be born with the death of the Isaacsons. But one would also ask: If in 1776 General Washington declared the naissance of a democratic republic — the United States of America — with the execution of Hickey who was judged a traitor because he was loyal to the British king representing feudal despotism, then what kind of state was to be established by the government of the United States of America with the execution of the Isaacsons?

Though he sees neither the sight that his parents were executed nor the scene that the United States was founded, Daniel does, however, successfully manage to vividly delineate the scene that his father and mother were electrocuted one after another. Thus, with the text of *The Book of Daniel*, he has become a witness to his parents’ life and death and to the historical turbulence of the United States in the 1950s during the Cold War period. In fact, the

central scene in the traumatic narrative is a revolution. Yet, the execution of the Isaacsons for treason has transformed the revolution into a conspiracy. Like the Rosenbergs, the Isaacsons were accused of conspiracy to commit espionage against their own country and “it is for the crime of treason that they will be sentenced” [3, p. 218]. When dramatically representing the authority of the state, the execution of the Isaacsons for treason by the American government becomes a frustration of the conspiracy and thus prevents a new state from establishment. As Doctorow sharply argues, “There are no failed revolution, only lawless conspiracies” [4, p. 24], in this case of the Isaacsons, treason is correlated with the state’s political violence—the root of the traumatic events. *The Book of Daniel* tells the reader that, according to the accurate definition of treason by the American Constitution, the new democratic republic of USA does its utmost to insist on that treason can only be a crime against the state rather than a crime against an individual or a party, and accordingly, it differentiates itself from a feudal monarchy. In addition, the new democratic republic of USA forbids penalizing the family members or the children of the guilty subject. It is quite clear that there is a great distinction between the feudal law and the American democratic law. As Gifts explains, the feudal law works “corruption of blood as a punishment for treason resulting in the disinheritance of the convict’s children and the forfeiture of the convict’s property to the crown. The U.S. Constitution prohibits this punishment in order to prevent the injustice of innocent children suffering for the offense of their ancestor” [12, p. 498]. Yet in *The Book of Daniel*, Daniel and Susan are undoubtedly penalized as corruption of blood for the so-called treason of their parents: they cannot reject the traumatic legacy imposed upon them by the state. This traumatic legacy that Daniel and Susan have to inherit from their parents’ tragedy has indeed destroyed the fantasy that a family history could easily be separated from the state’s power and the citizens are independent from their state. As Morgenstern points out straight, *The Book of Daniel* ironically and profoundly exposes the essence of American regime: “the federal government will not leave Daniel alone; even if he could ‘forget,’ he has always been and will

always be watched by the secret police” [9, p. 164]. Now, the root of trauma has been thoroughly exposed: it is the state’s political violence that has deprived the Isaacsons of their life in the interest of the state by radically violating the democratic system and cruelly destroying the social justice even though the democratic system and the social justice are what American people most cherish and American federal government is always committed to defend and guarantee.

#### IV. THE VICTIM OF TRAUMA WALKING OUT OF IT

In the late 1960s, the Left-wing political movement presented a new consciousness of belonging, which could be produced by people only in taking a risk together and adventuring together. The Left-wing groups with their actions on university campuses instinctively realized that the bond that should unite all American families together looked so inappreciable and so frail in the face of the state’s political violence that they agitated people to substitute it with a more powerful consciousness of belonging produced by people in their taking a risk together and adventuring together. Near the end of the novel, both the plots of the demonstration to Pentagon and the students’ occupation of the administration building of Columbia University represent this substitution.

In the poor southeast district of New York, Daniel, having found out the root of trauma—the state’s political violence, runs across a guerilla soldier Artie Sternlicht, a man of intelligence, compassion and action. Daniel discusses with him the founding of a “foundation for revolution” which will be funded by his and Susan’s blood money in memory of their parents’ martyrdom. In order to develop revolutionary consciousness among people, the foundation is to provide fund for publications and community activities. According to Sternlicht, America needs to be genetically altered with a radiation of images through a sort of image revolution. The revolutionaries will use the television commercial—the uniquely American art form—as its medium: “We’re gonna overthrow the United States with images!” [3, p. 155]. Doctorow, through Sternlicht’s proposition, represents the political optimism of the Left wing: So long as all

American people are united, bravely strive, and actively participate in the reconstruction of ideology and the image revolution to alter America, this absurd and unjust world will be certainly changed. Awakened by the vigor and wisdom of the Left-wing political radicals, Daniel immediately stops his self-destruction in his inner world, feels as if he had himself already stayed among the working people, and acquired strength of action from them. The novel ends at students’ closing Butler Library of Columbia University, which was the first famous act of the Left-wing movement and the most excellent media event in the 1960s. Doctorow’s describing the act of the Left-wing students to change the image of the state’s organizations of power represents his great confidence for a bright future, suggesting his firm political stand of the Left wing who unremittingly struggles for social justice.

#### CONCLUSION

In his trauma narrative, Daniel claims that what he wants is more than the “the family line” [3, p. 299], namely, what he really wants is the explanation or narrative of the history and politics of the whole American society. Ironically, the state’s political violence not only deprives Daniel of his family line by destroying his parents but at the same time imposes a traumatic heritage upon him. As Nietzsche says, “Life saves itself through art” [10, p. 28], the traumatic narrative of postmodernist literature treats man’s trauma through man’s pure-hearted confession after his encounter with rigorous realistic plight and painful spiritual crucifixion. The novel *The Book of Daniel*, by using the psycho-political trauma narrative through Daniel’s narration of his parents’ life and death, reconstructs American history in the 1950s in which the state, under the influence of McCarthyism, cruelly persecuted the communists and other politically progressive people in the fascist manner. This trauma narrative ironically reveals that the traumatic heritage that Daniel and Susan have to accept roots in the state’s political violence: even in the American democratic system, the citizens should absolutely subject to the state and must always be ready to sacrifice their lives for the state’s political need. Doctorow, a Left-wing postmodernist novelist, interrogates, through Daniel’s mouth, the United States of America, a

state that is the most particular about human rights, democracy, and social justice in the world: “My country! Why aren’t you what you claim to be?” [3, p. 51]. At the end of the novel, Daniel, having clearly understood the root of trauma, walks out of it and actively joins the revolutionary movement launched by the Left-wing students aiming at opposing and altering the image of American organizations of power.

### NOTES

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<http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=ZORLVApylxcvyAcCikHTk bJbz1nV6h4joagr93PsIHVoPiasACXU3-1W4n89f85>

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