E. L. DOCTOROW'S *THE BOOK OF DANIEL:* TOWARDS A POSTMODERN CONCEPTION OF JUSTICE

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The purpose of this paper is to examine E. L. Doctorow's conception of justice as reflected in his novel entitled *The Book of Daniel* with focus on the factors which impede the execution of justice and the narrative strategies Doctorow employs to view his themes from multiple perspectives. In *The Book of Daniel*, E. L. Doctorow describes the political climate of the 1950s (The McCarthy Era) when America was veering towards fascism. Although the book is based on the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in the early 1950s, Doctorow has said that the novel "is not about the Rosenbergs but rather about the *idea* of the Rosenbergs" ("False Documents" 160). Indeed, *The Book of Daniel* is not a fictional attempt to prove the innocence of the Rosenbergs but rather, as John G. Parks points out in his article entitled "The Politics of Polyphony: The Fiction of E. L. Doctorow", it is a "polyphonic reopening of the case, a re-hearing or better a re-speaking in the context of the New Left of 1960s."(456).

Doctorow explores his theme in multiple contexts – during the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s (The Cold War Era), in the context of the New Left radicalism in late 1960s, even in the larger context of biblical prophecy in the novel's allusion to the prophet Daniel and his struggle with exile and persecution. The narrator is Daniel Lewin, a graduate student at Columbia University. His parents, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, the fictional counterparts of Rosenbergs, were Bronx Jews, who were executed for conspiring to give the secrets of the atom bomb to Russia. Daniel's father was a radio repairman with a tiny Bronx shop and his mother a housewife. The novel centres on Daniel's attempts to find the truth about his parents, and about himself in relation to his parents and his younger sister, Susan. After Isaacsons' execution, Daniel and Susan were adopted by a law professor and his wife, the Lewins. The book begins with a trip that Daniel, his wife Phyllis and his son take to the mental

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hospital where Daniel's sister Susan is confined after cutting her wrists in an attempt to commit suicide and closes with three different endings. In between, we are exposed to Daniel's visions of the present and the past, his memories of his parents, his efforts to reconstruct their trial and execution in his imagination as well as to various documents shedding light on the political climate in America in the 1950s and 60s.

As Daniel describes the anti-communist hysteria of McCarthyism as it surfaced during the trials of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, he also draws our attention to his family history. His parents Paul and Rochelle were communists who were critical of the status quo and believed in the need for radical social change. For Paul, the communist ideology provided the tools for analysing and understanding the injustice around him. On the other hand, for Rochelle, politics was not theoretical or abstract but personal and emotional. Daniel compares his mother's communism to his grandmother's Judaism as both represent "some purchase on the future against the terrible life of the present" (42).[1] The coming of socialism is like the promise of heaven – a reward for those who suffer and keep faith.

Daniel finds it difficult to understand how his parents - a lower-middle class couple leading an ordinary life – could steal the secrets of the atom bomb from the government to give them to Russia. Hence, he suspects that they were unjustly convicted of a crime they had not committed. His distrust of the jury's verdict is affirmed when law students at Boston University review the trial transcript and find seventeen abuses as grounds for retrial. Pondering on the students' report, Daniel says:

> After a judicial process of three years involving the highest levels of American jurisprudence, if these students were able to find these errors of due process, no one in the judiciary was capable of minimal perception. (226)

Daniel's rhetorical question which follows lies at the heart of the concept of justice reflected in the book:

> If justice cannot be made to operate under the worst possible conditions of social hysteria, what does it matter how it operates at other times? (226)

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[1] All references to *The Book of Daniel* refer to *The Book of Daniel*. New York: Plume Publications, 1996

In T*he Book of Daniel,* Doctorow does not only expose the political oppression of McCarthyism but also suggests that political oppression was present before and after this period. In the 1940s, when his parents took Daniel to the communist black singer Paul Robeson's concert, their bus was attacked by a mob shouting anti-Semitic and racial slurs (47-52) and when Daniel participated in the anti-war march to Pentagon in 1967, he was severely beaten by the police and imprisoned for a night in the same way as his parents were destroyed for voicing their views (254-257). Hence, as Stephen Cooper points out in his article entitled "Cutting Both Ways: E. L. Doctorow's Critique of the Left", *The Book of Daniel* can be read as a "rebuttal to political optimism about the fleeting nature of political oppression in the US" (118). In other words, the view of history presented in the novel is cyclical rather than progressive and the impossibility of escaping the deterministic cycles of history is explicitly stated.

Throughout *The Book of Daniel,* Doctorow underscores the fact that The McCarthy Era did not only destroy innocent people but also left the victims' children with permanent psychological scars, indicating that the effects of injustice are long-lasting and almost impossible to overcome. In fact, the devastating effects of the mentality of the period on subsequent decades is one of the major themes of the book for both Daniel and his sister Susan are seriously impaired by their parents' arrest and execution.

As a young child, Daniel had believed that the Communist Party was the people's party and would support its members against government's oppression. However, with his parents' arrest, he learned that the party acts only in its own self-interest because it erased his parents' names from the membership rolls as soon as they were arrested (123) and reclaimed them after their execution when it realized their propaganda value as martyrs (220). Hence, Daniel maintains a vigorous disgust for all those who accepted the government's verdict against his parents, becomes suspicious of all political ideologies and detaches himself from them. Accordingly, his imaginative account of the FBI's intimidation of his parents, their arrest, trial and execution depicts the final years of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson's lives as an era of persecution. Having lost his belief in the ideals which served as touchstones for his parents, he adopts a cynical and sceptical stance towards everyone, even towards his foster-parents and his wife who are really concerned about him and want to help him. He is suspicious of the Lewins' motives for adopting him and his wife's eagerness to support him whenever he is in need because when he receives affection, he suspects that it is given to him out of obligation rather than genuine love.

Daniel's love, affection and respect for his parents is always accompanied by a feeling of guilt. Although he was only nine years old when they were executed, he cannot forgive himself for helplessly standing by while his parents were brutally murdered. Furthermore, he is alienated from the people around him by his belief that no one has suffered as much as he and his sister, Susan did. His feeling of survival exclusiveness i.e. his feeling that those who suffered are utterly different from those who have not discourages him from establishing relationships. As Michelle M. Tokarczyk maintains in "From the Lions' Den: Survivors in E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*", another survivor syndrome Daniel exhibits is observed in his inability to express his feelings and emotions which stems from his fear of deep pain (16). It is difficult for him to show emotion for he is deeply afraid of loving someone after having lost her parents tragically.

As Daniel's narrative unfolds, his psychological problems, especially his propensity for selfishness, violence and cruelty are made more manifest. For instance, when Susan is hospitalised, he says, "I can live with anyone's death but my own." (208). Also, on a family outing, he suddenly tosses his baby into the air and catches him precariously close to the ground while looking at the terrified "Isaacson face" (131). He can even go so far as terrifying and torturing his wife when she refuses to take off her pants to make love with him in the car while he is driving (58-59).

On the other hand, Daniel's sister Susan is actively involved in politics. She wants to establish "The Paul and Rochelle Isaacson Foundation for Revolution" for she believes that her parents' names provide talismanic power to a new movement in need of heroic inspiration. "The name Isaacson has meaning. What happened to the Isaacsons is a lesson to this generation." (80). By establishing the foundation, she wants to retrieve the ideals for which her parents stood. Yet, when she realises that her parents are being betrayed by the New Left as well, she cannot work with them anymore. Finding no way to rectify the injustice that was done to her parents, she slashes her wrists after which she is taken to a mental hospital for treatment where she says to Daniel "They're still fucking us." (9), which indicates that the betrayal is still continuing. Drawn to despair both by Daniel's unwillingness to share her enthusiasm about the foundation and The New Left's rejection of her parents, she attempts suicide again and towards the end of the book we are informed that she has succeeded in her last attempt to kill herself.

The narrative strategy Doctorow employs in *The Book of Daniel* can be described as deconstructive as it embodies the major aspects of deconstructive narration. Throughout the book, the narrative voice is self-conscious, and calls attention to itself. Daniel begins his story by commenting on his writing instrument – "a felt-tip marker, black" (3) and describes his narrative as "David Copperfield kind of crap" (95). He addresses the reader and reproaches him before relating the execution scenes of his parents: "I suppose you think I can't do the electrocution." (295). His self-reflective fiction shatters the illusion of reality the reader perceives in realistic texts and draws his/her attention to the process of writing. Moreover, as Daniel finds the narrative dimension of sequence "most monstrous" (245), he violates the linear, chronological ordering of events which undermines the unity and consistency of his narrative. This can be accounted for by the fact that Daniel's past and present are so closely interwoven that they cannot be separated. His past invades his present all the time. The abrupt shifts from the first-person to the third-person narration also impair the continuity and coherence of the narrative, making it fractured and disjointed.

Daniel's incoherent narrative that springs forward and backward in time and from first person to third-person narration is further destabilized by its rapid shifts from the fictional to the non-fictional mode and vice versa. Actually, Daniel's narrative is a pastiche of different genres – his account of the memories of his family, essays, excerpts from newspaper articles, the trial transcripts, historical analyses, chapters from encyclopaedias, letters and biblical quotations. This enables Daniel to accommodate different viewpoints regarding his parents' case in his narrative but as different viewpoints contradict one another, Daniel's attempts to find the truth about his parents is further blocked. The best example which demonstrates this phenomenon are the six books written about his parents' case:

> Two support the verdict and the sentence, two support the verdict but not the sentence, which they find harsh, and two deny the justice either of the sentence or the verdict. All possible opinions are expressed. (227)

Daniel is also perplexed by the conflicting views regarding his parents in the New Left Movement. While some members of the New Left regard the Isaacsons as martyrs and organise meetings and demonstrations to pay tribute to them, others criticize them severely. One radical member, Artie Sternlicht says to Daniel:

> Your folks didn't know shit. The way they handled themselves at their trial was pathetic. I mean they played it by *their* rules. The government's rules... Instead of standing up and saying fuck you, do what you want, I can't get an honest trial anyway with you fuckers, they made motions, they pleaded innocent, they spoke only when spoken to. (151)

As these contradictory opinions regarding his parents deconstruct one another, Daniel becomes more and more disillusioned. Eventually, he comes to the conclusion that "Everything is elusive" (42), which makes it impossible to determine for certain whether his parents were guilty or innocent. "I find no clues either to their guilt or innocence. Perhaps they are neither guilty nor innocent." he says (130).

Another deconstructive device Doctorow employs extensively in *The Book of Daniel* is parody which serves to foreground the injustice done to the Isaacsons by pitting it against the divine justice of God. As the title of the book suggests, the story of the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament provides a framework for the narrative of Daniel, his namesake and the myriad of allusions to the apocalyptic biblical story of Daniel are used to accentuate, by ironic contrast, the futility of Daniel's efforts to construct a narrative that can reveal a substantial, sustaining truth about his parents and about the political history of the era in which they were electrocuted. As Brian Dillon points out in his comprehensive essay entitled "The Rosenbergs meet Nebuchadnezzar: the narrator's use of the Bible in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*", Daniel "invokes the authority of the sacred precursor text, then appears to challenge its applicability to his circumstances." (374)

The Biblical Book of Daniel discusses the events that occurred after the expulsion of the Jews form Palestine and during their Babylonian and Persian captivity. In Babylon, Daniel was among the prisoner exiles but he won the favour of the king Nebuchadnezzar by interpreting his dreams with the help of God (1-5). In *The Book of Daniel,* Doctorow makes allusions to two stories associated with the prophet Daniel. In the first story, Daniel's three exile comrades - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - who refused to serve false gods were thrown into a fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar but they were spared with the help of divine intervention (3:26-27). In the second, Daniel was thrown into

a den of lions but God sent an angel that shut the lions' mouths and he walked out of the lions' den without a scratch (6:16-24).

The first reference to the biblical text in *The Book of Daniel* is the brief summary of the plot of the Biblical Book of Daniel (11). After his parents' arrest, Daniel quotes a line from Paul Robeson's song "Didn't My Lord deliver Daniel?" (128), which highlights by contrast the fact that no body could save Daniel's parents from the terrible injustice imposed on them by the US government. Later. Daniel establishes a parallel between himself and his biblical namesake when he refers to himself as "a young man trying to interpret and analyse the awful visions of his head" (205). However, whereas the prophet Daniel always interpreted the king's dreams successfully, Daniel Lewin is unsuccessful in coming up with a meaningful interpretation of his parents' arrest, trial and execution, all of which constitute terrible visions in his mind.

Daniel's description of the execution of his parents as well as his frequent references to electricity as a means of torture allude to the story where Daniel's three friends are saved from the fire by God. Reflecting on this biblical passage, Daniel says, "God sees that they survive the fire." (11) which underscores both his and his country's inability to intervene in his parents' wrongful punishment. The same story is evoked when Daniel prevents the shock treatment to be applied to her sister, thinking that it is a form of electrical torture that parallels the means of his parents' deaths (206). In this episode, Daniel refers to himself as Susan's "sole legal guardian" (207) and functions like the divine being who rescued the biblical Daniel's friends in the furnace. However, in contrast to the divine being in the Bible, Daniel's efforts to correct the injustice committed against Susan fail. She languishes in the hospital and later commits suicide.

The most significant reference to the story of the prophet Daniel is the quotation from the bible that closes the book. This quotation will be dealt with in the next section of this paper where the significance of the multiple endings is discussed.

To be able to comprehend the forces and motives underlying the political system which mercilessly killed his parents, Daniel critically examines the contemporary American history from different standpoints in the course of his narrative. He finally comes to the conclusion that history is elusive and relative; therefore, it is not an appropriate instrument for his pursuit of truth and justice. This is clearly demonstrated in the section called "TRUE HISTORY OF THE COLD WAR: A RAGA" (232-238) where Daniel examines the falsehoods,

delusions and errors of the Cold War Period drawing on many scholarly texts such as William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (237). As David Emblidge points out in "Marching Backward into the Future: Progress as Illusion in Doctorow's Novels", a raga is a Hindu form of devotional music and the literal meaning of the word is colour or mood and each raga has a definite ethical or emotional significance (399). Given this musical structure as metaphor, we can infer that Daniel's "True History" is analogous to one of the many ragas and therefore it is only one version of Cold War History, simply his version, always susceptible to contradiction, erasure and deconstruction by other versions. One important consequence of this is the loss of historicity, or the fictionalisation of history which, according to Fredric Jameson, is "the postmodern fate" of the traditional historical novel, even with Doctorow, "one of the few serious and innovative leftist novelists." (*Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 21). In this context, Fredric Jameson's comment below on *Loon Lake*, another novel of Doctorow's published in 1980, is also applicable to *The Book of Daniel*:

> This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past: it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past...It can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present; rather, as in Plato's cave, it must trace our mental images of that past upon its confining walls. (*Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 25)

As history is fictionalised and fact and fiction are fused in Daniel's narrative, he becomes even further removed from the truth he seeks.

In line with the deconstructive narrative strategies employed throughout the book, *The Book of Daniel* has three endings. Brian Dillon accounts for the existence of multiple endings in the following way:

> As the sole family survivor, Daniel reconstructs his family's history: their lives are completed but the narrative about their lives resists completion." ("The Rosenbergs meet Nebuchadnezzar: the narrator's use of the Bible in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*" 375)

The narrative resists completion because it has not been able to fulfil its function of finding the truth about the Isaacsons and rectify the injustice that was done to them.

In the first ending, Daniel returns to his family's former home and views from outside the setting for his parent's arrest. The second begins with the funeral of his parents and abruptly shifts to Susan's funeral. The third and the final ending dramatizes the end of the scene of writing. Students in the antiwar movement have occupied the administration building at Columbia University and shut down the library where Daniel has been producing the text we are reading. An antiwar protester orders him to leave the library "Close the book, man, what's the matter with you, don't you know you' re liberated?" (302). Daniel closes his third and final ending of the novel with the final passage of the Scriptural Book of Daniel:

> And there shall be a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation...and at that time the people shall be delivered. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake...And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever. But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, even to the time of the end...Go thy way Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. (302-3)

With the promise of a deferred but absolutely final justice, the biblical book ends optimistically. A dazzling celestial being whose "face shone like lightening" orders the biblical Daniel "to seal the book" (10:6-7). In contrast, in *The Book of Daniel*, an anti-war protestor Daniel does not know asks him to stop writing and leave the library immediately. Hence, Daniel's narrative reaches its endpoint randomly in an impasse, unable to retrieve the justice it seeks and without the promise of justice offered in the biblical text.

The concept of justice that emerges from Daniel's deconstructive narrative which resists completion and seems to lead nowhere is aptly associated with the notion of impossibility or the absence or inadequacy of the conditions essential for its execution. As Doctorow's view of justice denotes absence rather than presence, it has strong affinities with the postmodern stance towards justice, particularly with Jacques Derrida's reading of it in his article entitled "Force of Law". In this article, Derrida examines the nexus between

law and literature on the one hand and law and justice on the other. In relation with the law and literature nexus, he describes the categories and institutions of law and literature as well as the performative structures and power relations through which these categories and institutions logically cohere. Regarding the nexus between law and justice, Derrida maintains that law is a universal rule. norm or a universal imperative and justice is that rule singularly applied. Since law is universal and general, it does not address the singular cases. Consequently, to be just, the judge has to reinvent or reinterpret the law in each case and come up with a "fresh judgement", a term which Derrida borrows from Stanley Fish (23). However, there is no criteria by means of which we can determine whether the "fresh judgement" is just or unjust since the existing law is suspended when it is being reinterpreted or reinvented. For this reason, justice cannot be realized in the present:

> Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely...It follows from this paradox that there is never a moment that we can say *in the present* that a decision *is* just or that someone *is* a just man... Instead of "just", we could say legal or legitimate, in conformity with a state of law, with the rules and conventions that authorize calculation but whose founding origin only defers the problem of justice ("Force of Law" 23)

Hence, "justice remains, is yet, to come...it is á-venir, the very dimension of events irreducibly to come." ("Force of Law" 27).

Significantly, prior to the three endings, Daniel's final endeavour in his quest for justice takes place in the "Tomorrowland" zone of Disneyland where he meets Selig Mindish, a former friend of his parents who testified against them in their trial but who was also found guilty and arrested. Daniel suspects that Mindish might have become an informer as a consequence of his ignorance and fear and hopes that, as the only surviving person who was tried and imprisoned with his parents, he can give him valuable information about them. However, as a result of his advanced senility, Mindish remembers very little about his past. When he sees Daniel, he only smiles and nods therefore Daniel can learn nothing from him. Consequently, justice for the Isaacsons is deferred to "Tomorrowland", the realm of "would be" or "to come", echoing the

postmodern view of justice which allies it with differánce, deferral and impossibility.

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