



Negotiating Domestic Trauma after 9/11: Family, Memory, and Psychological Fragmentation in *Falling Man*

Rajni Bala

Research Scholar, PGGCG-11, Punjab University, Chandigarh

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ABSTRACT

Post-9/11 fiction frequently represents trauma not only as a public shock but also as a private crisis. It enters the home and reshapes ordinary domestic life. Families experience rupture in communication, emotional security, and relational stability. The central problem is that the catastrophe becomes a long-term psychological disturbance. It produces fragmented memory, broken language, and unstable interpersonal bonds (Caruth 4; Herman 33). This paper aims to examine the representation of domestic trauma and its effects on family structures after 9/11. It investigates how survivors struggle with speech, memory, and intimacy. It also studies trauma responses such as repetition, emotional numbness, silence, and paranoia (Herman 56). The research uses *Falling Man* (2007) as the primary text. The theoretical framework includes Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as belated experience (7), Judith Herman's trauma model emphasising relational rupture (52), and Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" (70). The paper argues that trauma is portrayed through fractured narration and disturbed domestic routines. It exposes emotional distancing and disoriented identity. Ultimately, the text demonstrates how private grief becomes a prolonged aftershock of public catastrophe (83).



Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, produced a cultural rupture that altered American consciousness and transformed contemporary literature. The attacks were not only a national tragedy. They also created a psychological crisis that entered everyday life. As a result, post-9/11 fiction emerged as an important literary archive of trauma. It records disorientation, fear, uncertainty, and the struggle to rebuild meaning after catastrophe. Yet the most persistent effect of such a catastrophe is often not experienced publicly. It is experienced privately. The domestic sphere becomes one of the most pressured spaces, since it is within the home that trauma unfolds daily.

Post-9/11 trauma narratives often represent psychological disturbance through fragmented memory and disrupted language. Trauma does not produce stable storytelling. It creates gaps, silences, and repetition. Cathy Caruth describes that trauma is experienced belatedly and returns through flashback rather than direct knowledge (4). This concept explains why trauma fiction frequently depicts survivors who cannot narrate their experiences clearly. They re-live it in broken forms. Trauma, therefore, becomes an emotional condition that reshapes daily life and identity. Judith Herman similarly insists that trauma reshapes personal relations and damages trust (52). This insight is essential for understanding domestic trauma narratives. Trauma does not remain inside the survivor. It spreads into relationships. It weakens intimacy and produces emotional distance.

This study will focus on how post-9/11 fiction represents trauma through domestic disequilibrium. The home becomes emotionally unstable. Language collapses. Relationships shift. Identity becomes fractured. Existing scholarship often prioritises the national and political dimensions of 9/11 literature. It focuses on media spectacle, terrorism, and collective memory (Kaplan 6; Grey 16). However, domestic trauma remains comparatively underexamined. This research, therefore, fills the gap by centring family life as the primary site of trauma representation.

The study focuses on *Falling Man* (2007) as a key post-9/11 narrative. The paper examines how catastrophe enters domestic space and disrupts marriage, parenting, and interpersonal belonging. It uses trauma theory as an interpretive framework. It draws on Caruth's belated trauma, Herman's relational trauma model, and LaCapra's concepts of acting out and working through. The aim is to demonstrate that trauma is represented not only through memory but also through domestic breakdown and relational fragmentation.



Problem Statement

Although *Falling Man* has often been studied as a post-9/11 novel dealing with public crisis and collective anxiety, its representation of trauma within family life remains less explored. The novel shows that the effects of catastrophe do not remain limited to public spaces. They enter the home. They reshape the private world of relationships and daily interaction.

In *Falling Man*, the domestic sphere does not function as a stable space of healing. Instead, it becomes marked by emotional tension and psychological instability. Communication between family members becomes strained. Silence, confusion, and emotional distance dominate ordinary moments. The trauma of the event continues within routine family life. It affects intimacy, trust, and belonging.

Therefore, the main research problem of this study is to examine how *Falling Man* represents family life as a site where trauma persists after 9/11. It investigates how domestic relationships reflect long-term emotional disruption. It also analyses how fragmented communication and unstable memory disturb family bonds in the novel.

Literature Review

Post-9/11 fiction has generated significant academic discussion, especially regarding the problem of representing an event already shaped through images, media circulation, and global spectacle. In *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*, Richard Grey describes that the post-9/11 novel faces a “crisis of representation” because the attacks became a cultural spectacle before they could become a lived memory (16). As a result, many post-9/11 writers avoid direct realism. They employ fractured form and fragmented narration. Such strategies reflect the instability of meaning after catastrophe. They also show how language becomes strained in moments of historical shock.

In *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, Kristiaan Versluys similarly describes post-9/11 fiction as a genre shaped by the psychological afterlife of catastrophe. He explains that these novels focus on repetition, unresolved grief, and disturbed identity rather than political explanation (12). These texts often represent trauma through broken narrative structure. They foreground emotional confusion and survivor consciousness. They also show that traumatic experience continues long after the public event ends.

Trauma studies provide essential conceptual support for analysing these narrative patterns. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an event that is



not fully understood at the moment it occurs. She claims that it returns later in intrusive and repetitive forms (4). This view helps explain why trauma fiction is shaped by gaps, silences, and narrative rupture. Similarly, in *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman emphasises that trauma transforms interpersonal life. She highlights the long-term effects of fear, withdrawal, numbness, and damaged trust (52). Such consequences become especially visible in domestic trauma narratives. The home becomes unstable. Family interaction becomes strained.

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between “acting out” and “working through” trauma. He explains that trauma may trap individuals in repetitive cycles of loss. In such cases, recovery becomes difficult and delayed (70). This distinction is useful in understanding post-9/11 novels, where survivors frequently remain emotionally stuck. Their trauma continues through routine life. Their relationships reflect ongoing rupture rather than healing.

Among major post-9/11 novels, Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* is widely considered a key trauma narrative. Much scholarship highlights the novel’s fragmented structure and its response to media spectacle. In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, E. Ann Kaplan says that trauma culture after 9/11 is shaped by media repetition. This repetition influences both public memory and cultural expression (6). DeLillo reflects this condition through psychological fragmentation and disrupted intimacy. In the article “A Precarious Tomorrow: 9/11 and the Commodified Future in *Falling Man*,” John N. Duvall mentions that the novel shows how catastrophe becomes commodified. He also suggests that survivor identity is shaped by insecurity and an unstable future (742). Although these critics provide strong readings of the novel’s structure and themes, the domestic sphere is often not treated as the central trauma site. Family interaction is frequently used as background context rather than a primary focus.

Similarly, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* has been examined as a narrative of mourning and trauma shaped through fragmented memory and visual form. Studies state that its child narrator and experimental structure reflect the difficulty of making sense of loss. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been widely read through identity crisis, suspicion, and cultural alienation. In the article “Rambling Confessional Narrative in Mohsin Hamid’s Novel *the Reluctant Fundamentalist*,” Ingrida Eglė Žindžiuvienė claims that the novel uses confessional narrative to convey psychological conflict and dislocation (219). These novels demonstrate that trauma extends beyond the event. It reshapes everyday life, identity, and relationships.



Post-9/11 fiction scholarship also includes texts that broaden the understanding of trauma beyond personal grief. In the article “Cultural Trauma, 9/11 and Amy Waldman’s *The Submission*,” Sonia Baelo-Allué states that Waldman represents national mourning through debate, conflict, and contested memory (150). Likewise, Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* has been analysed as a trauma narrative that connects terrorism to a longer history of social anxiety and fear. These works show that post-9/11 trauma fiction deals with both emotional and cultural aftermath. It reflects long-term instability rather than closure.

However, despite wide scholarship on trauma, media, and national identity, a significant research gap remains. Domestic trauma and family relationships are often treated as secondary to public crisis. The household is rarely explored as a primary arena where trauma continues. Therefore, this study addresses the gap by foregrounding domestic life in post-9/11 fiction. It examines how trauma disrupts intimacy, communication, and everyday routines within the family unit. It also analyses how the home becomes a space of emotional repetition and relational breakdown.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method based on textual analysis and close reading. Qualitative literary research is suitable because the study focuses on meaning-making, narrative form, and representational patterns rather than quantitative evidence. The primary objective is to interpret domestic trauma and relational disruption in post-9/11 fiction. The analysis, therefore, examines scenes of everyday interaction, communication breakdown, and emotional withdrawal as key textual evidence.

Trauma theory provides the central analytical framework. Caruth’s theory of belated trauma guides the interpretation of repetition, flashbacks, and fractured narration (7). Herman’s work supports the examination of trauma’s interpersonal consequences, particularly the collapse of trust and intimacy (52). LaCapra’s distinction between acting out and working through is applied to analyse cycles of repetition versus attempts at recovery (70). Together, these theorists allow the study to connect trauma symptoms to narrative techniques and domestic interaction. Primary data consists of the selected novel. Secondary sources include trauma theory and scholarship on post-9/11 fiction.

Trauma as Domestic Disequilibrium

The novel presents trauma as a condition that continues beyond the moment of catastrophe. It does not remain limited to the scene of public terror. Instead, it enters domestic space and reshapes emotional life. In *Falling Man*, this shift is immediately visible when Keith returns to the apartment after



surviving the attacks. His reappearance in the domestic sphere does not restore normal family life. It marks the beginning of emotional disorientation. The household becomes the first arena where trauma is carried and repeated.

DeLillo emphasises that the body itself becomes moving evidence of catastrophe. Keith arrives carrying the material traces of trauma, which makes the domestic space feel unfamiliar and fragile. The moment of reunion is presented as tense rather than comforting. The novelist writes:

He wore a suit and carried a briefcase. There was glass in his hair and face, marbled boils of blood and light. He walked past a Breakfast Special sign, and they went running by, city cops and security guards running, hands pressed down on gun butts to keep the weapons steady (DeLillo 5).

This scene is crucial because it shows how trauma crosses boundaries. It travels from the towers to the home. Keith does not narrate the event clearly. Instead, trauma is represented through silence, shock, and bodily presence. This demonstrates that domestic space does not function as a sanctuary after 9/11. It becomes psychologically unstable. It becomes a place where catastrophe is repeatedly felt through interrupted routines and emotional distance.

This pattern can be explained through Cathy Caruth's concept of belated trauma. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth argues that traumatic experience is not fully processed when it occurs. It returns later through repetition and intrusive memory. She explains that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (4). Keith's behaviour reflects this belatedness. He cannot provide a stable narrative of what happened. He appears physically present but psychologically absent. His trauma repeatedly enters domestic life through withdrawal and detachment rather than speech. Thus, the home becomes the central site where belated trauma is lived.

Another theorist who strongly supports this argument is Kai Erikson. In *Everything in Its Path*, Erikson defines trauma not only as an individual wound but as a force that damages the structures of belonging. He notes that trauma "works its way into the very tissues of community," disrupting relational security and shared life (185). The selected text reflects this domestic collapse. Trauma does not remain private inside the protagonist's mind. It damages relational intimacy. It breaks family stability. Keith and Lianne's relationship became emotionally tense. Their interactions are marked by hesitation and distance. Even when Keith stays in the home, he does not fully return to family life.



Domestic trauma is further intensified through Lianne's disturbed routines and anxious perceptions. She reacts sharply to the neighbour's Middle Eastern music. This incident reveals how trauma transforms domestic space into an arena of fear and paranoia. The household becomes a contested space rather than a stable home. Hence, the novel represents catastrophe not only as a historical event but as an intimate collapse of everyday belonging. Family disequilibrium becomes one of the most visible signs of trauma's afterlife.

Silence, Language Collapse, and Communication Rupture

A major symptom of trauma in *Falling Man* is the failure of language. Communication becomes reduced and emotionally strained. Dialogue loses its power to restore intimacy or repair damaged relationships. Words remain incomplete. Silence becomes more frequent than speech. This silence does not indicate peace or comfort. Instead, it signals emotional disturbance, psychological overload, and the pressure of an experience that cannot be made fully meaningful.

The writer repeatedly constructs domestic life through interrupted talk and withheld expression. Keith's return home after 9/11 becomes an early sign of this speech rupture. His physical presence is not matched by emotional articulation. The family cannot process the event through open conversation. Instead, trauma appears through pauses, unfinished sentences, and avoidance. In one early domestic scene, the atmosphere is shaped less by what is spoken than by what cannot be said. The novelist presents communication as fractured and fragile, revealing trauma as a disturbance in ordinary language:

Keith said he was okay.

He did not say much else.

Lianne did not ask him to explain everything.

What remained in the room was silence and the knowledge of what had happened (25).

This domestic incident demonstrates how catastrophe enters the home as an emotional blockage. The household cannot transform disaster into shared meaning. Rather than healing intimacy, speech becomes limited. Trauma, therefore, damages the most basic function of family life: mutual emotional exchange.

This linguistic collapse aligns with Cathy Caruth's claim that trauma resists direct narration. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, the theorist explains that trauma is not fully available to consciousness at the moment it occurs. She claims that it remains "not so much an event as *its address to us*," meaning that it returns later in indirect and fragmented ways (4). Elsewhere, she states



that trauma is marked by the fact that it is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (4). Because trauma is not fully “known,” survivors cannot easily speak about it. They struggle to translate experience into a stable narrative. As a result, trauma becomes visible through broken speech, gaps, and repetition. This pattern is evident in *Falling Man*, where domestic conversations remain incomplete and emotionally cautious. Keith’s inability to narrate the attacks does not represent forgetfulness. It reflects trauma’s resistance to language.

Judith Herman also highlights the relational cost of this silence. In *Trauma and Recovery*, she notes that trauma reshapes communication because survivors often adopt avoidance and emotional withdrawal. The theorist writes that trauma produces “a constriction in the capacity to feel” and “a constriction in the capacity to relate to other people” (56). This explains why the survivor of the novel becomes emotionally inaccessible at home. Silence becomes a survival response. It protects the survivor from re-experiencing intense emotional exposure. Yet in domestic space, this protective silence produces distance. It leaves the family emotionally divided even without direct conflict. The home becomes marked by unspoken tension. Emotional needs remain unmet. Intimacy weakens as communication breaks down.

These dynamics become clearer through further domestic incidents in the narrative. Keith turns away from family conversation and gradually returns to routines that require no emotional language, such as poker. His repeated absence signals not only physical withdrawal but emotional inexpressibility. Lianne responds to domestic tension through agitation and anger rather than open dialogue. Her reaction to the neighbour’s Middle Eastern music is a key example. It shows how trauma reshapes daily domestic perception into irritation, fear, and paranoia. Therefore, trauma does not simply remain inside memory. It reshapes speech behaviour, perception, and emotional access within the household.

Hence, the collapse of language emerges as one of the strongest domestic trauma indicators in *Falling Man*. Trauma appears through what cannot be spoken. It emerges through avoidance and fractured interaction. The characters’ inability to communicate reflects a deeper inability to rebuild relational stability. The home no longer supports coherence. It mirrors trauma’s internal fragmentation and keeps family life in a condition of continued disequilibrium.

Interpersonal Instability: Marriage, Parenting, and Emotional Distance

The novel represents trauma through interpersonal instability, particularly within marriage and parenting. In *Falling Man*, domestic intimacy becomes difficult to sustain after 9/11. The home gradually



loses warmth and emotional security. The marriage between Keith and Lianne becomes strained, not through constant confrontation but through slow detachment. Parenting also becomes unstable. Emotional distance replaces reassurance. As a result, family structure reflects trauma as an everyday relational imbalance rather than a dramatic breakdown.

A significant incident that demonstrates this instability is Keith's increasing withdrawal into poker. Instead of remaining emotionally present within the household, he becomes absorbed in repetition and escape. Poker becomes a substitute for communication and intimacy. It provides a space where emotions are not demanded, and language is minimal. His repeated absence turns marriage into an uncertain arrangement. It also exposes trauma's ability to reshape priorities and attachment. The writer depicts Keith's detachment as routine, indicating that domestic connection is no longer the centre of his identity. His disappearance into poker does not simply reflect irresponsibility. It reflects trauma-driven emotional avoidance.

The novelist also presents interpersonal instability through the protagonist's extramarital relationship with Florence, another survivor. This incident is important because it shows how trauma dislocates intimacy and redirects emotional need outside the household. He cannot rebuild closeness with Lianne through ordinary marital language. Instead, he seeks contact with someone who shares the same traumatic reference point. Their relationship becomes an attempt to repeat the event indirectly through bodily closeness. The affair, therefore, becomes a symptom of trauma's relational disruption. It shows that trauma fractures marriage not only through silence, but also through displaced attachment. The novelist portrays the logic of this trauma intimacy through restrained narration and emotional emptiness:

He went to her place again.

He did not say why he came.

He did not explain what he needed.

It was simply what he did, and what they did together (25).

The emotional effect of such incidents is visible in the marital atmosphere. Lianne senses the distance even when it is not directly named. Marriage becomes emotionally unsteady because trust weakens and shared routines no longer carry intimacy. Parenting is affected by the same instability. Justin lives within a domestic space where fear and uncertainty circulate indirectly. Even when adults do not openly discuss the event, the household atmosphere communicates trauma. The child's environment is therefore shaped by emotional disturbance rather than security.



Judith Herman's trauma model helps explain this pattern. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman argues that trauma damages relational stability because it reshapes emotional life into fear, withdrawal, and avoidance. She notes that traumatised individuals often experience "a constriction in the capacity to feel" and "a constriction in the capacity to relate to other people" (56). This explains Keith's reduced emotional engagement with marriage and parenting. His withdrawal becomes a form of psychological defence. However, it produces relational loss. In family life, emotional access is necessary for stability. When trauma blocks emotional availability, domestic intimacy becomes fragile.

This interpersonal disturbance is also shaped by post-9/11 cultural anxiety. In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, E. Ann Kaplan states that trauma after 9/11 extends beyond direct experience because media repetition spreads vulnerability and insecurity. She explains that trauma culture produces ongoing feelings of instability within everyday life (6). This atmosphere intensifies interpersonal imbalance in the novel. Domestic space becomes psychologically charged. Private relationships absorb public catastrophe. The result is a household structured by emotional tension, distance, and fear.

Therefore, interpersonal instability in *Falling Man* suggests that the family does not automatically resolve trauma. Instead, trauma reproduces itself through the collapse of trust, the weakening of intimacy, and displaced attachments. Keith's withdrawal into poker, along with his relationship with Florence, demonstrates how trauma reshapes marital identity and emotional belonging. Domestic life becomes an active site of trauma representation. The household reflects trauma through emotional absence, strained parenting, and fragmented relational continuity.

Narrative Fragmentation as Trauma Representation

The fragmented form of *Falling Man* functions as a narrative technique of trauma representation. The novel's structure resists stable chronology. It moves through episodic scenes and abrupt transitions. Domestic moments appear suddenly and collapse without closure. Memory interrupts the present. Images return without narrative resolution. This discontinuity mirrors traumatic experience. It reflects how survivors struggle to access coherent, linear memory after catastrophe.

DeLillo repeatedly breaks chronological sequence by inserting traumatic flashbacks of the towers, the ash-filled streets, and the falling bodies in between ordinary domestic scenes. These shifts create a sense that the characters cannot separate private routine from the disaster. The reader experiences trauma structurally because the novel refuses smooth development. For example, scenes of Keith's domestic



presence with Lianne and Justin are followed unexpectedly by fragments of the attack or by episodes of the survivor's isolated movement through the city. The narrative does not "progress" toward recovery. Instead, it reproduces the rhythm of trauma, return, interruption, and repetition. The structure itself performs traumatic memory.

This effect becomes clearer through the recurring "Falling Man" performance episodes. These scenes appear without warning across the narrative. They interrupt the flow of ordinary urban life. They re-stage the traumatic image of the falling body. They also destabilise the emotional rhythm of the characters. Lianne's reactions to the performance, anger, fear, and confusion, show how trauma returns through involuntary visual reminders rather than through controlled narration. Through such incidents, the novel demonstrates that trauma is not experienced only in memory. It becomes an external recurrence in daily life. The structure replicates this return by inserting disruptive images into ordinary scenes.

The fragmented structure also shapes the domestic argument of this research. Domestic moments do not develop toward intimacy or stability. They remain incomplete and unsettled. Even when Keith and Lianne attempt to rebuild family life, the narrative repeatedly interrupts their domestic presence. The text moves away from emotional closure and returns to discontinuity. The novelist presents family life as episodic. The home does not appear as a continuous, stable setting. Instead, it becomes a broken sequence of moments marked by distance and interruption. Therefore, narrative fragmentation parallels family fragmentation. The structure reinforces trauma as a lived domestic condition.

Cathy Caruth's theory strongly supports this link between trauma and discontinuous form. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, the critic explains that trauma resists full comprehension in the moment it occurs. She says that trauma is defined by its delayed structure, meaning that it returns later in intrusive and incomplete forms. The theorist writes:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature, the way it was precisely not known in the first instance, returns to haunt the survivor later on (4)

This explanation clarifies why post-9/11 trauma fiction frequently rejects conventional realism. Linear narration assumes stable memory and stable meaning. Trauma breaks both. Since the event is "unassimilated," the narrative becomes episodic and fractured. *Falling Man* applies this condition formally. The story cannot contain the attack as a completed past moment. It returns repeatedly through



disrupted structure, sudden imagery, and unfinished scenes. The form becomes a psychological map of trauma's belated return.

Kristiaan Versluys supports this idea through post-9/11 fiction criticism. In *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, he explains that post-9/11 novels often construct trauma through disrupted narration and interiorised consciousness rather than public political explanation. He observes that these narratives represent catastrophe through “fractured form” and “the persistence of trauma in psychological afterlife” (12). This claim matches DeLillo's technique. *Falling Man* does not build a single coherent explanatory plot. It remains disjointed. It privileges emotional aftermath over closure. The refusal of wholeness becomes the novel's trauma method.

Thus, trauma in *Falling Man* is not only a theme represented through character experience. It becomes the organising principle of narrative form. The domestic sphere is affected by the same structural logic. Family life appears fragmented in the same way as narrative time. Domestic scenes are brief and unsettled. Emotional moments fail to stabilise. The form, therefore, reinforces the argument that trauma persists beyond catastrophe by shaping both content and structure. Fragmentation becomes the novel's most powerful method of narrating trauma as a lived, domestic afterlife.

Conclusion

This paper has examined domestic trauma and family disequilibrium as central representational strategies in post-9/11 fiction. It has been argued that catastrophe in the narrative does not remain limited to public history. It enters the household and reshapes intimacy, communication, and emotional stability. The family becomes a contested space. It reflects trauma through relational rupture and fractured belonging. Domestic life becomes a primary site where trauma is experienced daily.

Through Cathy Caruth's concept of belatedness, trauma is understood as a condition that returns repeatedly through memory fragments rather than stable narration (7). This explains why trauma is represented through silence, repetition, and narrative rupture. Judith Herman's model has clarified trauma's interpersonal consequences, especially emotional withdrawal and damaged trust within relationships (52). Dominick LaCapra's theory of acting out and working through has strengthened the analysis of trauma repetition and unresolved grief patterns that prevent emotional equilibrium (70). These theoretical lenses collectively support the argument that domestic instability becomes one of the clearest signs of post-9/11 trauma.



The study has also demonstrated that family life is not merely a background theme in post-9/11 fiction. It becomes a primary trauma space. Domestic scenes reveal how catastrophe shapes everyday existence through disrupted routines, fractured intimacy, and emotional distancing. This focus fills a critical gap in existing scholarship, which often privileges national spectacle and political aftermath. By centring domestic trauma, this paper contributes to trauma fiction criticism and deepens the understanding of post-9/11 narrative strategies. It shows that trauma persists not only through public memory but through private collapse. The home becomes a long-term site of psychological aftershock.

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