

**On the Human Being and Being Human  
in Jonathan Franzen's  
*Strong Motion and Freedom***

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## On the Human Being and Being Human in Jonathan Franzen's *Strong Motion and Freedom*

### Abstract

A human being is a biosocial being who represents the highest level of development of all organisms on Earth. Jonathan Franzen is a critical darling, a commercial success, and a magnet for controversy. His career was launched with the publication of *Corrections*, which won the National Book Award and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. His follow-up, *Freedom*, received so much attention that it began a debate about the politics of critical attention. Franzen represents, in his *Strong Motion and Freedom*, global capitalism as a force that violates the nature and threatens the American society. The research is divided into three parts: an introduction, ecocritical analysis, and a conclusion. The ecocritical analysis explains the use of the use of the third wave ecocriticism in Franzen's *Strong Motion and Freedom*. *Strong Motion and Freedom*, reflect the conflict between the environment and human being. The environment is a mirror of the violent actions of human being.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom*, *Strong Motion*, sustainability.

## الإنسان وكونك انسان في روايات جوناثان فرانزين "الهزة القوية" و"الحرية"

### مستخلص

الإنسان هو كائن حيوي واجتماعي يمثل أعلى مستوى من التطور لجميع الكائنات الحية على الأرض. ومع ذلك، لا يوجد شيء أكثر تعقيداً من الإنسان. مشاكل الإنسان لا تنتهي أبداً. يسعى فرانزين إلى الكشف عن التهديد الذي تتعرض له الطبيعة بسبب جشع وهيمنة الرأسمالية العالمية. تكشف كلتا الروايتين أسباب وعواقب تدمير الطبيعة. تمثل الورقة البحثية تطبيقاً عملياً للمقاربة النقدية البيئية لكتاب جوناثان فرانزين الحركة القوية والحرية. جوناثان فرانزين هو شخصية محبوبة لدى النقاد، ونجاح تجاري، ونقطة جذب للجدل الحركة القوية والحرية تتناول التنمية الاقتصادية ومدى تأثيرها على الأخلاق والسلوكيات الإنسانية. إنها توفر علاقة مترابطة بين الرأسمالية وتدميرها للبيئة. وينقسم البحث إلى ثلاثة أجزاء: مقدمة، وتحليل نقدي بيئي، وخاتمة. يشرح التحليل النقدي البيئي استخدام استخدام الموجة الثالثة من النقد البيئي في حركة فرانزين القوية والحرية. يدرس العلاقة بين الإنسان والنظام البيئي. ويمثل القسم الأخير النتائج. تعكس كلا الروايتين، الحركة القوية والحرية، الصراع بين البيئة والإنسان. البيئة هي مرآة لأعمال العنف التي يقوم بها الإنسان.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النقد البيئي، جوناثان فرانزين، الحرية، حركة قوية، الاستدامة.

## **Introduction**

A human being, in essence, exists in both a spiritual and a physical world. The physical world, which is known to man through his five physical senses, is complemented by a spiritual one. Nowadays, the physical realm is represented in the capitalist powers that reinforce their desire for domination, self-protection, and comfort without regarding to nature. These disordered human lusts have caused chaos and suffering in the world. As a result, there is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive understanding of the spiritual world in order to put human existence on Earth into the proper perspective and order (Berry 15).

The spiritual world, on the other hand, is not a fantasy realm but a real environment for the human being. It is not a separate realm of existence; it interconnects with the physical world. Nevertheless, the spiritual world is distant and unknown to human beings because of their undeveloped spiritual senses. The reality of the spiritual world can be recognized by the intangible forces of nature. It is real and more important than the world which is known to the human being. Awareness and a proper understanding of this reality are essential in reshaping a physical world and in promoting the spiritual existence.

This research is meant to explain the spiritual world and its relation to the physical world. It clarifies the role of human beings in creating the balance between the physical and spiritual world. It focuses on the third wave ecocriticism; third wave deliberates cultural backgrounds and ethnic identity. Additionally, third wave perspective attempts to study human experience in relation to the human world and to compare human experiences across cultures. So, this research answers the questions: What is the nature of the spiritual world? How does it relate to the physical world? How do human beings mediate between the two worlds to create an ecological balance?

## An Ecocritical Analysis

“Nature bats last” is an environmental slogan. It means that “no matter what human beings do, sooner or later the laws of nature will express themselves and take precedence over human activity” (Wapner 56). Undoubtedly, the Earth is in distress; it sends human beings unprecedented signs of its imbalance by tsunamis, earthquakes, and storms. These symptoms indicate that the ecosystem as a whole approaches a ‘tipping point’ of irreversible change with serious consequences. Some human beings respond to these signs by paying attention to the ecological destruction and the acceleration in the decline of species. Yet, sadly, these responses come from the mind which has caused the environmental disharmony. Jonathan Franzen, in *Freedom*, points out the human destruction on Earth as follows:

AND MEANWHILE ... WE ARE ADDING THIRTEEN MILLION HUMAN BEINGS ... TO KILL EACH OTHER IN COMPETITION OVER FINITE RESOURCES! AND WIPE OUT EVERY OTHER LIVING THING ALONG THE WAY! IT IS A PERFECT FUCKING WORLD AS LONG AS YOU DON'T COUNT EVERY OTHER SPECIES IN IT! WE ARE A CANCER ON THE PLANET! A CANCER ON THE PLANET!. (296)

Human beings believe that they are separated from nature. They ignore the cruelty of their environment and think that it poses a problem. But the world is not a problem to be solved. It is a living body and a part of themselves. Human beings are a part of an apocalyptic crisis. Therefore, there is no healing until human beings recognize the roots of their separation.

Human beings are oblivious to the essence of nature. They lose nature because they consider land and environment commodities which are used and exploited in the name of socio-economic evolution. This perspective tends to eliminate any spiritual value of the land. As Chief Lyons states:

The natural world and the people who carry its wisdom know that the created world and all of its many inhabitants are sacred and belong together. Our separation from the natural world may have given us the fruits of technology ... but it has left us bereft of any instinctual connection to the spiritual dimension of life... the connection between our soul and the soul of the world, the knowing that we are all part of one living, spiritual being. (12)

The spiritual world is surrounding human beings. It is the real home where they can find their comfort zone and make their peace. Even if the capitalists do not believe in the spiritual world, they are still under its control. Their rejection of the spiritual world is either because they do not understand it or because they refuse to believe in a world which cannot be proven to them physically. Capitalism represents the leader of the rebellious forces. Jonathan Franzen points out, “You may not believe in these forces, but they believe in you... they surround you... they control you” (Franzen, *FA* 13). Therefore, human beings seem like cogs if they are measured by the capitalist standards. They lack the humility and flexibility to nature. They are ruled out by capitalism which shapes their thoughts about nature. They make capitalism their spiritual world.

Ecocritical theory is a fruitful and coherent perspective. It is an understanding of the relationship between human beings and the physical world. The ecocritical approach sheds light on the environmental issues as threat to wildlife, pollution, and depletion of natural resources. Here, the role of ecocritic is to “keep one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists ... the origin of our discourse” (Garrard 10). Likewise, spirituality is a broad concept that includes “a sense of connection to something bigger than us and it typically involves a search for meaning in life” (Carrette and King 59). Nowadays, spirituality is a big business. The modes of spirituality are introduced in the counseling of loss, addiction, and depression. Spirituality as a cultural trope has been appropriated by capitalism to extend markets, and to maintain at the

leading edge of information economy. It has become a new cultural addiction and a false cure for the dysfunction of the American life. It is celebrated by the American society as a force for healing, and inner transformation; it provides a solace in a meaningless world (Carrette and King 60).

In *Strong Motion*, Jonathan Franzen reveals the misunderstanding of the concept of spirituality which has become prevalent in the consciousness of the American individuals. He attempts to uncover what is considered a silent takeover of society by capitalist ideologies through a popular discourse of spirituality. He announces:

The system believes that all vital functions of the average American intelligence can now be simulated by a program [is] less than eight megabytes. A medium-price laptop with a hard disk will run the program, which can perform exactly the same mental risks as a randomly selected American ... You may wish to object: Can the artificial intelligence read a book with comprehension? Can it paint a truly original painting or compose a symphony? Can it distinguish between fact and mere image? (*SM* 463)

Capitalist-free markets do not have ideas or emotions. They have passivity and coolness. Franzen clarifies one of the most recent phenomena of capitalism: digital technology. It makes no distinction between human and artificial intelligence in America. To Franzen, the shift from a culture based on the printed world to a culture based on virtual images is apocalyptic. It shapes a new way of being human. The digital technology and its guards attempt to reduce human functions to machinery: the human eye is 'the client for the image', an ear is a 'channel', and faces are 'display devices' (Franzen, *Alone* 108).

Similarly, Franzen's *Freedom* criticizes the constructions of spirituality which have been subsumed under capitalist agenda. Franzen refers to the unsuitable digital technology as follows:

Seriously ... the look and feel of Apple Computer products is an indication of Apple Computer's commitment to making the world a better place. Because making the world a better place is cool, right? ... well, actually, it's little unclear why, in a better world, the very coolest products have to bring the very most obscene profits to a tiny number of residents of the better world. This may be a case where you have to step back and take the long view and see that getting to have your iPod is itself the very thing that makes the world a better place. (*Freedom* 123)

For better or worse, the American society is now a technological society. Digital technology has become a medicine for the American society. It takes the cue from technology in order to relieve its suffering as efficiently as possible. The Americans agree to let technology create their own world. In other words, they let technology take care of them.

However, this capitalist agenda is not interested in the transformation of culture, but in money. It aims to promote and enable passivity in the American society. Whatever the benefits to the Americans, it is difficult to argue that either technology or free-market capitalism can solve the problems of morality and the world unfairness. They undertake to be wardens of discontent in America. They take the ugliness and lousiness of the world and return it to society as a gift: works of anger and sadness (Franzen, *Alone* 131).

In *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen not only presents the functions of the economic force but also focuses on the individual desires that emerge out of personal visions. Franzen protests against the present power dynamics which make an alternative pattern of human community. Franzen challenges two dominant concepts of spirituality. First, he seeks to challenge the contemporary use of this concept as a means of reflecting and supporting economic policies which move toward privatization of all spheres of human life. Moreover, Franzen attempts to shift debate about spirituality away from a misleading emphasis upon truth and authenticity (e.g. "what counts as a real spirituality?") toward

understanding the consequences of such claims (e.g. “who benefits from constructions of spirituality?”) Franzen reveals that the fundamental ground shift in America is related to the deregulation of the markets (Franzen, *FA* 108). As Jeremy Carrette and Richard King indicate, “With the emergence of **capitalist spirituality** we are seeing an attempted takeover of the cultural space inhabited by a specific economic agenda...the ideologies of consumerism and business enterprise are now infiltrating more and more aspects of our lives” (65).

Nevertheless, Franzen does not attempt at all to identify a pure realm known as the ‘spiritual’ and separate it from society. In a sense, there is no spiritual realm which exists in isolation from the social, political, and economic world. This explains the second feature of spirituality which is an adaptation to capitalist spirituality. The most troubling aspect of modern spirituality is that it promotes accommodation to social, economic, and political mores. Franzen indicates:

You were nothing but a machine for the unpleasant production and pleasant consumption of commodities. And why, in the name of responsible parenthood, you are foresting in your children the same ethos of consumption... why you're guaranteeing that their life will be as cluttered with commodities as yours is ... You might begin to worry that with every appliance that you buy, every gallon of hot water that you waste, every stock that you trade, you are hastening the day when there is no more land or air or water in the world. (*SM* 465)

Accordingly, there is an urgent need to change the misuse of culture and spirituality.

Jonathan Franzen is one of the American novelists who have used the natural world to reexamine the human-made world. He has gathered ethical and moral visions by analyzing the human activity. Franzen's novels reside in the middle ground. They are filled with descriptions of the non-human and human world. He exemplifies the

belief that “to turn place into home we must understand how the geography of land and the geography of spirit are one terrain” (Allister 56). Franzen shows how slowly and deeply the knowledge of ‘where you live’ helps ‘you to understand how to live’ though the powers of capitalism and commercials urge the American society to be disaffected and to desire the evil (Franzen, *FA* 30).

Moreover, Franzen tries to make a space for an alternative, more socially engaged, structure of spirituality in order to depict the contemporary human life. He turns his gaze on the world to see more clearly what is inside. He seeks to come up with an adequate structure that establishes a comfort zone despite the powers of narcotic technology. He has a faith in literature to perform the autopsy of the American reality, and to make the reality of the natural world available to the human being. Franzen declares his faith in literature as follows:

I was sanctifying the reading of literature... Naturally, the more TV I watched, the worse I felt. If you're a novelist and even *you* don't feel like reading, how can you expect anybody else to read your books? I believe I ought to be reading, as I believe I ought to be writing [the genre] consisted of spanning the expanse between private experience and public context. (*Alone* 41)

Franzen, instead of striking up a conversation with the lonely heart, makes a compact between art and the American society.

In *Strong Motion*, Franzen sheds light on two prominent characters who believe in the spiritual world. The first character is a man named Alec Bressler. Bressler is a Russian émigré of German extraction. He owns and manages the radio station WSNE. Bressler's official duty is to tape the daily broadcast editorial. He usually hovers in the studios with satisfaction that his station functions and transmits his chosen programs. Bressler is, on the other hand, dissatisfied with the domination of the capitalist spirituality. He sadly questions the complete disintegration of the contemporary world. Bressler points out the literal truth as follows:

TV noose and noosepapers are the enemy. For eight years we had a U.S. President with subnormal intelligence. Every day he does horrible harm to language, the future, the truth. Every single sinking person in the country knows this, except not the networks and noosepapers. Is suspicious, no? ... OK ... But isn't it the responsibility of every sinking person to say to networks and noosepapers: You are my enemy. You betrayed me. You are not really on my side. You are side of money... No more! You are out! I'll find a good magazine and a radio station, sank you!. (Franzen, *SM* 154)

Actually, Bressler's words mirror the core of Franzen's thinking. Franzen writes, as an intellectual person, in a tone of resentment. He is furious about the lousiness of the American reality as well as the disappearance of the role of the intellectuals.

Alec Bressler, in *Strong Motion*, constitutes WSNE to establish a world whose individuals are not just living as human beings but rather learning how to be humans. He admits:

I bought this station eight years ago ... It had real strong local noose coverage, popular music, also Bruins games. For eight years I try to *remove politics* from WSNE. It's my American Dream – a station where people talk all day long (no music – it's cheat-ing!)... not a WORD about politics. This is my American Dream. Radio with talk all day and no *ideology*. Let's talk about being a human being. (Franzen, *SM* 30)

In *Strong Motion*, Rita Kernaghan is another character who believes in the spiritual realm. Rita shows that grief and recovery can be interwoven into a literary act. At the beginning, she is guilty when she participates in dumping Sweeting-Aldren toxic wastes. After the earthquake beats Ipswich, she is tortured by the sense of guilt. Rita realizes that she is involved in destroying the environment owing to Sweeting Aldren illegal dumping. Rita suffers disorientation, depression, and addiction. However, what rescues her

mind and helps her to move from disorganization to reorganization is nature in general and writing in particular.

Rita Kernaghan recognizes that she is intimately tied to the network of non-human world. Her understanding of this relation does not only lessen her pain, but also gives her a framework to reevaluate her own desires and needs. Jonathan Franzen employs, in *Strong Motion*, the tool of writing to think about diversity in the world. Writing leads Rita to reshape her present life through a narrative of ecological balance and self-sufficiency.

Rita Damiano Kernaghan is a popular lecturer on the local New Age circuit. She writes literary works on inspirational topics. Rita is the author of “*Beginning Life at 60*”, “*Star Children*”, and “*Princess of Italy*”. She is the widow of Boston attorney John Alfred Kernaghan. She lives with a step-daughter, Melanie Holland (Franzen, *SM* 60).

Moreover, Rita Kernaghan was best known for her conflict with Ipswich Town Meeting because she erected a pyramidal structure on the roof of her house. In 1987, the Town of Ipswich confessed that a clerical error had resulted in the granting of a building permission for the pyramid. Accordingly, the Town enforced the removal of the pyramid. Rita sued the Town and refused “an out-of-court-settlement under which the town would have paid the cost of removing the pyramid and restoring the house to its origins 1823 design” (Franzen, *SM* 44). Rita justified her right to build the pyramid was to exert healing and preservation.

According to Rita Kernaghan, the pyramid is a refuge where she keeps her books and writes her spiritual works. To Rita, the pyramid is a construction in which a sixty-year-old woman can live her life alone at peace with herself and with the world around her. This harmony demands two steps: she has come to understand the unity of man and nature, and to understand the cruelty of nature because of human actions. Nevertheless, Rita's famous pyramid, so much in the news in recent years, does not protect her from the earthquake. The damage on the Kernaghan estate has been among the most severe in

Ipswich. Rita does not maintain that the pyramid “offered eternal life in the present existence” (Franzen, *SM* 60).

*Strong Motion* attempts to resolve the tension between human being and nature. Rita Kernaghan's works aim to understand how the relations and claims of natural world have a meaning in her life. Rita's connection to the natural world reminds her how much she is guilty and how she knows very little. At the same time, it leads her to self-knowledge and self-sufficiency. For example, in her *Princess Italy*, Rita refers to the decline and imbalance of Massachusetts society. She emphasizes the importance of returning to the spiritual realm. Rita announces:

In this fanciful yet erudite work, Dr. Kernaghan advances the hypothesis that the cornerstone of society was the universal gratification of sexual desire, and proposes that the human appendix, now a vestigial organ... both eternal and highly functional. With the hypnotic regression of Massachusetts, Dr. Kernaghan embarks on a compelling exploration of deep psychology ... the modern world's potential for a return to a golden age. (Franzen, *SM* 32)

Obviously, Rita attempts to tease out the chaotic and worthless part of herself. She recognizes the essence of the relationship between human and nature. Rita indicates, “I wasn't sure why I was here, and because I'm a rational creature and like to know what's going on. I wanted to process what I was doing ... I was in a new place and understanding the value of where I was” (Franzen, *SM* 61). Rita moves from a phase of disorganization and despair to reorganization and peace. To Rita, nature is a refuge which gives her the stability she needs.

Rita Kernaghan develops her spiritual senses through a retreat to nature. This shift is significant in her book *Beginning Life at 60*. It is a perfect embodiment of the principles of the spiritual sphere. Rita learns that

the soul is eternal and youthful, gay and joyous, filled with

glad melodies. Age is no impediment unto the soul. Nay, death itself be no impediment. In her workshop, we hearkened unto her message. We learned. We grow. We laughed. We become as young again. We are healed, healed not as the modern world would have us healed, but spirituality. (Franzen, *SM* 62)

Rita's creative works succeed in undoing her repression. Though Rita is sinful, she attempts to be optimistic. Rita's works melt down her loss and re-find her self by a rapid oscillation between imagination and knowledge of reality. Consequently, Rita exemplifies how a writer has the ability to invite to a spiritual ecology.

Spiritual ecology can be defined as “a spiritual facet of all issues that are related to conservation, environmentalism, and Earth protection” (Berry 22). It asserts a critical need for contemporary awareness of ecological crises. The principle of spiritual ecology is to examine and to reassess human attitudes towards the Earth. It calls for spiritual responsibilities to save the planet. James Gustave Speth proclaims, “I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change ... I was wrong ... The top environmental problems were selfishness, greed, and apathy” (qtd. in Lyons 5). Thus, ecological renewal and sustainability depend on spiritual sensibility and an attitude of responsibility.

Furthermore, spiritual ecology includes an array of practices which intertwine spiritual concern with environmental experience. It recognizes the unity and interrelationship of all creations. It can be described as “a co-evolution of spirituality and nature” (Lyons 5). On the contrary, the capitalist powers not only control the world, but also they prevent human beings from realizing their own world. They exclude human spiritual interest in nature. Tony Juniper and Ian Skelly, who have promoted environmental awareness, point out, “by continuing to deny ourselves this profound, ancient, intimate relationship with nature, we are compounding our subconscious sense of alienation and distances, which is mirrored in the

fragmentation and disturbing of harmony we are bringing out in the world around us” (26). Human beings destroy the ecosystem that sustains the diversity of life. This ruin causes the imbalance on Earth. It also endorses the need for a spiritual and moral response to the environmental crises. Spiritual ecology directs human beings towards nature to understand the causes of the current ecological disasters and to find guidance to move into a state of balance.

At the same way, Franzen's *Freedom* employs writing as a way to work through grief. It has taken the form of autobiography. The autobiographer, Patty Berglund, narrates her pains and makes sense of it all. This form of narrative has absorbed Patty. She uses narrative as a substitute for her loss. Patty says:

You can believe me or not, but it's the truth. It was just a thing I had to write for myself, to try to get better. It was a *therapy project*, Walter... I know there's stuff in there that must be horrible for you to read, I can hardly even imagine how horrible, but that's not *all* there is in it. I wrote it when I was depressed, and it's full of all bad things I was feeling. But I've finally been starting to feel better. (Franzen, *Freedom* 283)

The autobiography is a kind of spiritual healing. It is a literary vision which represents a self-portrait of one's life. It's a mirror which is familiar to Patty Berglund but not to others. She writes on various subjects that move her deeply. On the other hand, she tries to understand her self in relation to the world around her. She learns how to re-envision her own past and how to temper her sorrows.

In his article “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment”, James Olney argues, “the autobiography is not considered interesting” until “it begins looking more closely at the self, and how the self shapes and is shaped by the act of writing” (qtd. in Allister 48-49). In *Freedom*, writing heals and turns a vague pain into a narrative act. Patty Berglund's autobiography transforms her chaotic feelings and desires into a narrative that explains and heals herself. Further, the autobiography does not sustain a dramatization of selfhood in a way

which leads to solitary self. In *Freedom*, the autobiography is an act of self-reorganization. Patty Berglund is immersed in self-consciousness; she writes about the nonhuman world or other people to reexamine their own lives and make her inner peace.

Over half way through *Freedom*, Walter Berglund and his assistant, Lalitha, have a discussion about the best title for launching their grand project of population control. They decide to call their project a “Free Space” (Franzen, *Freedom* 230). This resonant term indicates a world of people who are less jostling for resource scarcity. But it metaphorically shapes a new narrative space which Franzen has opened up for himself. *Freedom's* opening chapter – Good Neighbors –portrays the scene of neighborliness. Neighborliness is reduced to bitchiness and surveillance: how the gossipy neighbors look to the Berglund family in St. Paul. One learns from their loquacity that the Berglund family is in trouble, but the tenor of Berglund problem is unknown. Then, chapter two of *Freedom*, “Mistakes Were Made”, proceeds as Patty Berglund's autobiographical narrative. It unfolds entirely in her voice. On the other side, no one in *The Twenty Seventh City* or *Strong Motion* narrates either novel. *Freedom* implies a seismic change in Franzen's fiction. It's not at the level of the narrator's distance from the characters. The narrator deliberately disappears into the portraits of Walter, Joyce, and Joey. Patty in her own voice – using a third-person ‘she’, not a first-person ‘I’ – empowers not to narrate herself but to narrate as well the surrounding fictional world (Weinstein 148-49).

Moreover, Patty Berglund represents a pair of equal parts: wit and bile. The first is represented in Patty's anger at her next-door neighbors, Carol Monaghan and her mate Blake. Patty's bile is fanned by the brazen relation between her mid-teen son, Joey, and Carol's daughter Connie Monaghan. While Blake remodels Carol's rented house and chainsaws the trees of the neighborhood into the shape he and Carol like to look at, Patty protests:

“Excuse me”, she [Patty] said, “What happened here? Can somebody tell me what happened? Did somebody declare

war on trees without telling me? What's the story? Is she not renting anymore? How can you tear the back wall off a house you don't even own? Did she somehow rent the place without our knowing it? How could she do that?". (Franzen, *Freedom* 8)

Later on, as Patty and Walter's marriage moves toward collapse, Walter comes home after work and finds a breast augmentation brochure on her desk:

"Jesus", he said, examining it. "This is obscene."

"Actually, it's a medical brochure."

"It's a *mental-illness* brochure, Patty. It's like a guide to how to become more mentally ill."

"Well, my dear, but in fact you don't get to make the decision, because it's not your body. It's mine. Isn't that what you've always said? You're the feminist in this household."

"Why are you doing this? I don't understand what you're doing with yourself". (Franzen, *Freedom* 294)

Jonathan Franzen writes this dialogue to show the ill-suited marriage of Patty and Walter Berglund. Franzen may "have no peer when it comes to the sound of a marital discord" (Weinstein 151). As well, Franzen grasps one intact insight. He reveals that the notion of a uniform world of coherent values is false. Effortlessly, Patty punctures Walter's feminism. Although he is and remains feminist, Patty pours out her dissatisfaction with her life and his role in it. Hence, the point is far away from breast implants. It is the mismatch between Patty and Walter (Weinstein 151).

Moreover, when Patty Berglund narrates her own life, it gives *Freedom* inconceivable moves which do not exist in Franzen's earlier novels. Patty narrates her sufferings, pains, and sorrows. She remembers her rape by the well-connected Ethan Post. Patty indicates:

As far as actual sex goes, Patty's first experience of it was being raped at a party when she was seventeen by a

boarding-school senior named Ethan Post. When she started fighting, she fought hard, if not too well, and only for so long, because she was drunk for one of the first time ever. [But] the indignity was that Ethan had considered her a nothing that he could just rape her and then takes her home (Franzen, *Freedom* 22-23).

Here, it is expected that Patty narrates the consequences of the rape scene as follows: the violence of the act, the intensity of the woman's anger, and the judicial action. Indeed, none of this shapes Patty's narrative. Rather, Patty summons into her account her mother, her father, and her coach as witnesses. Each of them is blind to her distress.

None of her mother, her father, and her coach is worried about Patty. Patty is a victim. However, Joyce, her mother, says, "What I want to know is what *you* think" (Franzen, *Freedom* 43). Joyce chooses a line of inquiry: "Whatever *you* want sweeti". Patty, as a narrator, adds, "Joyce pronounced this 'sweeti' like the first word of a foreign language she was learning" (Franzen, *Freedom* 44-45). To Patty, "*you*" is an infringement of an individual's personal rights. Deeply, this insight is devastating. Joyce neglects her daughter's disaster and favors her liberal politics over Patty. Ray, Patty's father, shows a little compassion. He refuses to sue Ethan Post. Ray denotes, "Ethan Post's family has a social clout" (Franzen, *Freedom* 46). Coach prefers the morale of the team to the psyche of Patty. Patty is supposed to "let Coach inform Hampshire prep school where Ethan was a student, so he could be expelled and denied a diploma, and that if Patty didn't do this she would be letting down her team" (Franzen, *Freedom* 47). The brutality of the rape starts to appear less painful than the abiding indifference of Joyce, Ray, and Coach. Consequently, the rape scene is not only a traumatic event but also a diffuse social structure of others surrounding the girl who feels, before, during, and after this event, more invisible than ever (Weinstein 160).

This structure of narrative is inconceivable in *Strong Motion*. Franzen's characters, Louis Holland, Eileen Holland, or Rita

Kernaghan, are generous in their own way. Each is a “you”. Franzen writes what happens to them, what they do, and how they solve or fail to solve their dilemmas. In *Freedom*, Patty Berglund is treated as, and sees herself as, a sort of “nobody”. If the rape scene centers on either of Patty's sisters, Abigail or Veronica, it may have concentrated on the psychic damage inflicted on “you”. But Patty's narrative proceeds by way of neglect. Thus, Patty's narrative emphasizes the preciousness of selfhood. It shares a common ground with the “free space”; *Freedom* aims to depict the social arena of the rest of America.

Obviously, Franzen wrote *Freedom* with a double vision towards the American society. On the one hand, the entire West Virginia fiasco with mountaintop removal reveals angry and impoverished people. Franzen grasps the world from their point of view. On the other hand, entrusting the narrative act to Patty indicates the dysfunction of her family. Beside Patty's “nobody” narrative, Franzen shows the entire American life in a neutral prose.

In addition, *Freedom* sheds light on Franzen's narrative change. He attempts to free the narrative voice from the usual marks of his own writing. When Franzen disappears into Patty's autobiography, he aims to write the immediate circumstances of mainstream culture. He ceases to be the writer who labors under the shadow of preciousness (Weinstein 155). Franzen admits:

I've never felt less self-consciously preoccupied with language than I did when I was writing *Freedom*. Over and over again, as I was producing chapters, I said to myself, “This feels nothing like the writing I did for twenty years – this just feels transparent”. I wasn't seeing in the pages any of the signs I'd taken as encouraging when I was writing *The Corrections*. Here, with *Freedom*, I felt like, “Oh my God, I just wrote however many metaphor-free pages about some weird days in the life of a college student, I have no idea if this is any good”. (Interview, Weinstein 23)

Franzen employs his characters, in *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*, to confront issues about how to write one's life, how to turn knowledge of the world into a fictional text, and how to portray the impact of the non-human world on human being. Either Patty Berglund or Rita Kernaghan stands explicitly outside and inside the text: outside in the surrounding world; inside in making an exposition part of the writer's reorganization of selfhood. Countless human beings have suffered grief and then moved to exclude their sorrow. But Franzen's characters, Patty Berglund or Rita Kernaghan, write a literary text in order to help them reexamine their selfhood. Their texts are both process and product. They intertwine into their literary act to regain hope and reshape their lives which is a way to end grief and loss. Hence, **what is the difference between human being and being human? Human being** is a kind of creature who is governed by his needs, interests, and emotions. **Being human**, on the other hand, is the same human being who uses his consciousness, love, and care to govern his needs, interests, and emotions.

“Fiction is about what it is to be a fucking human being”, David Wallace writes (qtd. in Timmer 301). Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, Mark Danielewski, and David Wallace are considered the contemporary descendants of the early postmodern writers. This young generation of writers moves beyond what is perceived as a dilapidated way of framing what it means to be human: the postmodern perspective of subjectivity (Timmer 304). They focus on how the contemporary sense of the self differs from a postmodern conception of the self. They are also interested in how the self is situated in various socio-cultural settings that carry characteristics of the American life. As Dave Eggers proclaims:

I do not live in a postmodern time. I did not live in a time when something *new* was called *modern*, so for me there is no such thing as a *modern*, and thus there cannot be anything *postmodern*. For me, where I am standing, it is all New. The world, every day, is New. Only for those born in, say, 1870 or so, can there be a meaningful use of the term postmodernism, because for the rest of us we are born and we see and from

what we see and digest we remark our world. (17)

To Eggers, postmodernism is no longer an oppositional way of conceiving the present. The postmodern idea currently fails to envision what is new against what is modern. Hence, Eggers and his generation attempt to think about what is new without being framed by postmodern thought (Timmer 301).

On the other hand, there is a friction between postmodern conceptions and a cluster of feelings which cannot be articulated within postmodernism. This friction leads to think about alternative ways of presenting the self. It explores a new sensibility that is labeled as a “post-postmodernism” (Timmer 301). This new tendency is parallel to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's conception “re-humanizing subjectivity” (Timmer 303).

Throughout *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*, Franzen explains a set of related feelings, needs, and problems in which his fictional figures have difficulty to make sense of themselves. They suffer the lack of making decision. The self threatens to implode the point of invisibility, loss, and passivity. This is notable when Franzen refers to Patty Berglund as follows:

Poor Patty, poor lost Patty, who wasn't doing anything brave or admirable in Washington ... This was simply a fact. But Walter felt that he would sooner die than acknowledge this obvious fact to Patty... There was emptiness at Patty's center that it was his lot in life to do his best to fill with love. (*Freedom* 186)

Further, Franzen's characters attempt to find some guidance. They feel unequipped to deal with their existential freedom. Franzen puts it in *Strong Motion* when *Renée* Seitchek criticizes the rotten climate of Somerville. She announces:

It's obviously a problem I have. I always wanted to live here. But then I found out that part of me that made this place attractive, the part of me I shared with the other people who

actively wanted to be here, was not a part of me that I liked anymore. And the fact that I'm still here after six years is this ghastly reminder of something about myself I wish I'd forgotten six years ago. I feel so implicated. (188)

To Franzen, fiction is a way to explore what it means to be human today. It is the preeminent center of social instruction. Fiction is a transformation of “experiential dross” into “linguistic gold”. It means “taking up whatever the world has abandoned and making something beautiful out of it” (Franzen, *Alone* 129). In his *Strong Motion and Freedom*, Franzen figures out a way of outdoing the disorder of the American society. He employs the illogic of modern warfare as a metaphor for the general denaturing of American reality. Franzen believes that a novelist “could trick Americans into confronting if only he could package his subversive bombs in a sufficiently seductive narrative” (*Alone* 38). Consequently, the mission of the novelist is to cope with ailing systems that promote passivity and troublesome ethics.

Nevertheless, the institution of writing and reading serious novel bears a strange resemblance to contemporary America that has been drained by capitalist powers. Franzen fears that there is no place in the world for fiction writers. He proclaims, “I WAS AS DEPRESSED as the inner city of fiction” (*Alone* 189). To Franzen, the panic grows in the gap between the work of literature and increments of cultural change. The obvious reason of the decline of the social novel is that modern technologies have become fertile alternative to the novel. It seems that the relation between the public and art is never comfortable. Franzen denotes:

It's understandable that a large segment of the population not waits around for some genius writers and artists to come up with more adequate structures, but should instead take comfort in the powerful narcotics technology ... even though these narcotics are addictive and in the long run only make the society's problems worse. (*Alone* 132)

Obviously, the American society attempts to avoid all kinds of

conflict on which fiction has always thrived. The Americans make their peace with the new technology. They prefer the unconsciousness to the consciousness. They choose to live in an imagined world, loneliness and invisibility, and deny realizing the real sense of privacy.

The darkness of the American society has no easy cure. The pain is real. The burden of carrying the knowledge is real. At the same time, the compact between the art and society is disintegrated. So, Franzen feels lonely. Loneliness makes “the burden of knowledge heavier” (Franzen, *Alone* 132). Franzen believes in the interrelation between the novelist and the reader. He wants to share his faith in literature with his readers. In his *How to Be Alone*, Franzen states:

I used to consider it apocalyptically worrisome that Americans watch a lot of TV and don't read much Henry James. I used to be the religious nut who convinces himself that, because the world doesn't share his particular faith (for me, a faith in literature), we must be living in End Times. I intend this book, in part, as a record of a movement away from an angry and frightened isolation toward an acceptance – even a celebration – of being a reader and a writer. (*Alone* 2)

The more Franzen feels that he is alone, the more he thinks that he needs to cure in order to fit the real world. To Franzen, literature is a form of personal freedom that frees him from the false world around him. It is a means to live as a human being who saves himself. At the same time, Franzen's condition is not an illness. Franzen needs to understand his place in the world. Without that understanding, without a sense of belonging to the real world, it is impossible to establish a comfort zone.

Accordingly, Franzen is the novelist who stops receiving undesirable calls of ambient culture. He manages to remount his own imagination and go into a deep isolation. Perhaps the essence of fiction is solitary work: the work of writing, and the work of reading. But this withdrawal from the world strives to “be able to hear the

world better and know yourself better, and you produce something unique” (Weinstein 8). Franzen, the loner, is the bird-watcher. Whatever this passion signifies, it testifies to a desire to escape the teeming urban scene, and to leave the routines of the social performance. Birding embodies the idea of “how to be alone”. Franzen suggests:

To be hungry all the time, to be mad for sex, not to believe in global warming, to be shortsighted, to live without thought of your grandchildren, to spend half your life on personal grooming, to be perpetually on guard, to be compulsive, to be habit-bound, to be avid, to be unimpressed with humanity, to prefer your own kind: these were all ways of being like a bird. (Franzen, *DZ* 189)

## Conclusion

Nature represents the features of the physical and spiritual world. The physical world refers to the natural and precious resources like air, water, and soil which have been polluted intensively with disastrous consequences. Nature is a mirror of human actions. Human disorder is reflected in his misuse of nature. So, to benefit from nature with disastrous exploitation, human beings should understand nature in order to rationalize the use of natural resources and to be in harmony with it. This interaction is beneficial to human beings. It makes peace and establishes a comfort zone. Human beings will find nature healing if they work out reconciliation with nature. On the other hand, Jonathan Franzen, as a theory-minded person, employs literature in general and fiction in particular as a guidance to understand his place in the world and to assure the relation between the writer and the reader.

In *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen has used nature to analyze the problems of the human-made world. To Franzen, nature is a home where he focuses on the moral and spiritual well-being. In a sense, nature is a refuge which rescues human beings from devastation and ruination. Refuge is an emotional act as well as a complete process of consciousness. Franzen shows how to live in spite of the powers of capitalism which have changed the American life. He emphasizes the deep relation between human being and nature. Franzen attempts to explore how different species organize and how individuals are part of large communities. Thus, the recovery comes from the natural order and from the knowledge of how human being is part of an ecosystem that reflects his actions.

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