

## **Dehumanizing Terrorists: A Comparative Study of Updike's *Terrorist* and Lahiri's *Lowland***

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**Abstract:** *The concept of terrorism receives two different treatments by the writers of two different socio-cultural ancestries. In John Updike's novel Terrorist (2006), the Muslim terrorist protagonist Ahmad's beliefs and actions are more incomprehensible and dehumanized than that of Jhumpa Lahiri's Udayan in Lowland (2013). Edward Said condemns the terrorist characters who are placed in isolation, out of time and context position to take a dehumanized decision ('The Essential Terrorist', 2006). It is expected that writers of terrorist literature will project terrorism through an analytical and causal view of the characters and situation. This paper will explore the differences between the two terrorist characters keeping in mind the after affect of 9/11 apocalypse.*

**Keywords:** *Terrorist, Dehumanization, Muslims, 9/11*

### **Introduction**

Post 9/11 American fiction tends to focus on the trauma, apocalyptic sensation, disorientation of the victims and intensity of the shattered feelings of American dream. Don DeLillo's *The Falling Man* (2007), Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), Ian Banks *Dead Air* (2002), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2006) can be named in this list. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Lowland* is not written on the backdrop of 9/11 still the writer's subconscious mind is deeply inflected by the bleak prospect of America, as she once admitted about 9/11 in an interview that: 'It affected me profoundly' (Grossman, April 9, 2012). Updike's *Terrorist* critically analyze the psychological aspects of the terrorists who adopt self-destructive means, for example, *Terrorist* by John Updike is narrated through the voice of an American teenager, Ahmad Ashmoy Mulloy, who converts to his Egyptian father's religion and eventually adopts the path of terrorism. His inspiration from the religious book Quran which is manipulatively analyzed by Ahmad Rashid, his mentor and the imam of the local mosque, lead him to bomb the Lincoln Tunnel. Although he did not commence the terrorist attack at the end

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of the book, he did not either discard the path of terrorism. The portrayal of the characters start from being hateful to the American people from the very first line and we do not find any gradual depiction of his being radical terrorist, only some 'jihad' inspiring out of context lines quoted from the Quran. While analyzing the thoughts and religion of Muslim characters in post 9/11 books it is commonly seen that these characters are portrayed as responsible to nurture ideologies which are hateful towards western culture. About the stereotyped representation of the terrorist characters Terry Eagleton says: "Writers such as Martin Amis and Hitchens do not just want to lock terrorists away. They also tout a brand of western cultural supremacism" (Eagleton, 2009). However, Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel, *Lowland*, adopts a different approach portraying a terrorist character name Udayan, which is far from being stereotypical, rather contemplative and speculative. Udayan is related to Naxalite movement, a movement by a separatist group from Communist Party of India emphasizing armed revolution in India, and in the novel we will get a gradual depiction of how he gradually turns out to be a terrorist influenced by his contemporary socio-political incidents and popular uprisings. Though set in different cultural backdrop, comparing the two novels we will explore two types of treatment of terrorist characters. One is more comprehensible human and another seems more artificial, incomprehensible, and dehumanized projection which is similar to Edward Said's idea of locating 'terrorist essence' to any Muslim character. Purpose of this essay is to show how the writings on the terrorists who are 'others' in relation to the writers' ethnicity may fall short of appropriate, understandable and logical representation and may dehumanize terrorists characters. Jhumpa being an Indian by origin tried to explicate the mind set of an Indian terrorist more logically than an American writer Updike, who portrayed a non-ethnic Arab-American terrorist more inaptly. The treatments of the two terrorists' characters, in these two books, are obviously noticeably different.

The term dehumanizing can be defined 'as treating others in such a way as to erode, obstruct, or extinguish some of their distinctively human attributes' (Mikola, 2011) or as 'denial of the subjectivity, individuality, agency, or distinctively human attributes of others' (Lemoncheck, 1985). What kind of treatment of terrorists do we get in literature? Among all the literary texts on terrorism Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Devil* is considered by Margaret Scanlan (2001) as the first classic book on terrorism in modern time. In this book, the

anarchists and their flimsy motives are criticized as we find almost all the characters of the terrorist group are dead or in prison by the end of the novel. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is another major novel on terrorism before the World Wars. This novel shows the unfortunate death of the innocent family members due to Mr. Verloc's involvement in destroying the Greenwich Observatory, and finally his and his wife's suicide brings a dismal ending to the novel. Dorris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*, published in 1985, seems to be a conceivable construction of a terrorist. Alice Mellings, her turning from a housewife to a communist is shown through a gradual process of undertaking terrorism being part of the friend circle who are fighting against the capitalist society. Published in 1991, Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, is a critical proposition of the role of writers and terrorists in a media driven society. Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* humanizes the terrorists to some extent as lovable characters. The points of view focused in different terrorist-novels are like: criticizing and mocking terrorism, showing the ultimate fatality of terrorism, upholding that apparent revolution is ultimate destruction, focusing the lamentation of the terrorist turning the terrorist from the path of violence, being open ended. If literature is a reflection of life, then it is expected that it can, to some extent, be understood from a novel: how the persona of the terrorist is build up and what surrounding social, geo-political and religious ingredients are at work to make him/her a terrorist.

After 9/11 apocalypse the number of books on terrorism started to increase more than ever. Andru Dubus's *The Garden of Last Days* (2008), Ian Banks' *Dead Air* (2002), Ken Kalfu's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2006) and John Updike's *Terrorist* are some examples of the post 9/11 novels which exclusively offer the account of Islamic terrorism. Some common traits of these books are the focus on extreme religiosity of the terrorists, and religion as the driving force for terrorist attacks. In these books it is portrayed that Muslims by their faith automatically bear the seed of terrorism in their mind.

Elaine Martin (March 2007) expects the terrorist subject should be put in an 'interlocking grid of time, causality' and history. They should not be represented as 'irrational mad man' destructing for his/her own sake. Because most of the time the terrorists are well organized and intellectually capable people. About the intellectuality of the terrorists Lenin remarked that 'the terrorism is violence of intellectuals'. But most of the post 9/11 books reduce the terrorists only to some particular 'irrational' traits.

### Thematic Analysis

In *Lowland*, Lahiri's Udayan, portrayed mostly through third person narrative voice, is never called a terrorist inside the book; only on the basis of his underground activity we come to know that he is an activist or more precisely a terrorist. Revolutionary activities and preaching of Naxalite ideology are not the only focus of this character. His family life such as the close relation with his brother, adventurous journey into Tollygange, other romantic Tom *Sawyerish* adventure, playing hide and seek with his mother to taunt her, are minutely described to portray him a normal person with flesh and blood. His love affair with Gauri and the emotional closeness between them are portrayed in the book in such a way to find him an ordinary human encroached with a beautiful past with everyday love, hope and dream. But Udayan does not lament for his past like Paul in *All Quiet on the Western Front* who misses the close family bonding and poetry.

Jhumpa Lahiri places Udayan in such a location of history (1967, uprising of the Naxalite movement) which is relevant to extensively understand his activities, and pathologically analyze his characteristics. So, when we search the reason for his involvement in Naxalite movement, we discover that it is part of his adventurous, rest-less and challenging mentality from childhood which loved football and played hide and seek with his mother, questioned the social norms, even in the school he used to challenge the teachers.

In 1967, when injustice was done to the ethnic people of Naxalbari in Darjiling by open-firing at a procession, Udayan like many other could not accept the execution of the people. But he does not want to be a non-servant commentator of all the incidents that take place in our life. He wants to take part in it. That's why he questions his father's involvement in anti-British movement: "if he was so proud that India was independent, why hadn't he protested the British at the time? Why had he never joined a labour union? Given that he voted communist in elections, why had he never taken a stand?" (p. 25) He wanted to be an activist so he joined the party who wanted equal distribution of land by using force. To some level the reader may sympathetically analogize Udayan's decision. He is not at all an obscure character to the readers. Any writer should rationally elaborate the development of a terrorist character in their writings for example in *The Devil*, Dostoevsky located Stephan's nihilistic antagonism and pride at the root of adopting terrorism; Udayan before being related to the party studied a lot about the Maoist movement to learn more about the Naxalite party movement and thinks of an 'egalitarian structure of the country and better

land reforms' (p. 41) to 'improve the lives of million people'(p. 43). Udayan is concerned about the political situation all around the world like the anti-war movement going on in America at that time.

We find a dreamer in him who wants to be vigilant, reactive and useful to the society by adopting any means; in this case he adopts the Naxalite movement which is even called by many Indians a 'romantic movement'. Udayan becomes a terrorist. He killed a policeman with the help of Gauri. His good will for the betterment of Indian peasants cannot justify his terrorist attacks. Through his death at the end of the novel Lahiri indirectly disapproves Udayan's approach of incorporating violence; at the same time we come to know that Naxalite movement comes to a close at that time (Dhar, November 9, 2014). The character of Udayan binds all the characters of the novel in a single string. Even after his death he continues to live in his wife and brother's married life and through his daughter's defying nature of social norms. A connectedness is created among the characters by him. Udayan partakes an extremist way of leading life but we can logically establish all his decisions and actions in the novel.

On the other hand, Ahmad Ashmoy Mulloy in John Updike's *Terrorist* is portrayed like a born terrorist who choose Islamic values to lead his life and the values teach him to hate the American culture. Why he is so hateful towards the non-Muslims is not clear in the book. No causality or logical argument is brought to analyze his childhood and upbringing. Memory can construct identity of a person but we find no significance of it in Ahmad's life. Only the absence of father and a craving for some father figure can be found from his childhood. Ahmad's life is out of touch of normal sleeping, eating, and playing with other boys. At the beginning of the novel Ahmad, an eleven year old boy, is found isolated from his friends, parties and the things other American young boys are attracted to:

He does not have any close friend, he never enjoys the party, he is no way represents an American teenager that we know. Ahmad seems not to listen to music, or use a cell phone, or lust after girls, or go to movies, or read any books. He is simply and only a block of Islamic disgust. (Wood, 2006)

From the very beginning, in fact, from the title of the book, he is germinated with the spirit of being a terrorist as the book opens up saying "DEVILS, the

devils seek to take away my God" (Updike, 2006, p. 3). But we do not find any convincing logic for Ahmad's growing up such a solemn character who takes shelter in religion. The only clue we have about his turning to "Allah" is an attempt to find a father figure as his mother was explaining to Jack, his guidance councilor at the school, "I guess a boy needs a father, and if he does not have one he'll invent one" (p. 117). His father, an Egyptian immigrant Muslim, left the family earlier when he was only three and his mother is not so sincere (or too liberal) a woman to bring up her son with any strong ideals. His non-practicing catholic mother was herself a volatile personality having short term relationships with men and letting her son choose his own path. Ahmad says:

We come and go in our apartment as strangers...for the other night she produced a flurry of interest in me, as if remembering that I was still there. We have never communicated well. My father's absence stood between us, and then my faith, which I adopted before entering my teen years. (p. 223)

This background very vaguely rationalizes Ahmad's turning into a terrorist. Unlike Udayan he takes no interest in learning world politics. He only believes in the Quranic quotes misrepresented to manipulate him. Throughout the novel, we find him quoting Quran, remembering his tutor's advice regarding the prophet's sayings. "My teacher at the mosque says that all unbelievers are our enemies. The prophet said that eventually all unbeliever must be destroyed" (p. 66).

Ahmad's extreme hate for American men, women, culture and other religions is repeatedly mentioned in the novel. He shows abhorrence towards any non-Muslims though most of the non-Muslim characters in the book treated him warmly. Especially, the school counselor Jack Levy came to visit him personally out of concern that a bright student may stop pursuing college study but Ahmad receives him negatively:

Ahmad has felt the man approach, and then the presumptuous, poisonous touch on the shoulder. Now he is aware of, too close to his head, the man's belly, its warmth carrying out with it a smell, several smells--a compounded extract of sweat and alcohol, Jewishness and Godlessness, an unclean scent stirred up by the consultation with Ahmad's mother, the embarrassing mother he tries to hide, to keep to

himself. The two adult voices had intertwined flirtatiously, disgustingly, two aged infidel animals warming to each other in the other room. (p. 142)

We find a human 'Ahmad' only when we find him fascinated with classmate Joryleen Grant, a seductive girl whose "smooth body, darker than caramel but paler than chocolate", is a frustrating temptation for him. When she was set to test Ahmad's credibility as a suicide bomber dying for the sake of religion, he said: "Joryleen you keep those cloths on. I respect you the way you used to be, and anyway don't want to be devirginated until a lawful marriage to a good Muslim woman, like the Quran says", but the very next moment after fighting with his inner desire for her he said, "I want you to take off the rest of your clothes and we'll just lie together and talk". He becomes a pathological case afflicted with hard core religious restriction restraining him from exerting free will. In *Dead Air* by Ian Banks, we find a similar conflict of Bassam al-Jizani, who continuously hates his own self while drinking and visiting strippers' club: a possible reasoning by the writers of a terrorist's masochistic mind.

At the end of the book he is persuaded to do something great to save his religion and to be in heaven, as the God promises so for the martyrs. But the irrational undertaking of a mission of bombing the tunnel, whose purpose and goal is unclear to the accomplice, points towards the writer's rushed attempt to conclude Ahmad as a terrorist. Finally, Ahmad becomes a character who separates his bodings with any other characters: his mother, the imam, Charley (his boss's son) and Joryleen. He cannot find anyone entirely reliable so he never opens himself to anybody. He is separated from the history, does not comment on the middle-Eastern situation, never regrets the discrimination in the society, and only shelters himself in his own brain full of some scripture and religious codes. He becomes a mechanized tool to all that hateful things uttered against American Culture and beliefs. He is a dehumanized projection of a religious belief system incapable of showing love, sympathy, honour, and jealousy. This projection of the protagonist is a kind of essentializing Muslims as terrorists.

In an article in *The Nation* Edward Said provides a critique of the ideological and cultural battle against terrorism; citing two problems with literature on Terrorism: "first, its selectivity ('we' are never terrorists no matter what we may have done; 'they' always are and always will be), and second, its

wholesale attempt to obliterate history, and indeed temporality itself. For the main thing is to isolate your enemy from time, from causality, from prior action, and thereby to portray him or her as ontologically and gratuitously interested in wreaking havoc for its own sake" (Said, August 15, 2006). No one is born terrorist, so humanizing the terrorists showing the gradual way of becoming a terrorist will portray a better understanding of the paradigm which instigates terrorist attacks. Udayan, though a terrorist, is capable of love, marriage and being a father, at certain point of his life. But Ahmad, though a meek character, we do not find anything warm and humanly about him.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded with Terry Eagleton's condemnation of the 'slandorous reduction of Islam to a barbarous blood cult.' He warns the stereotypical writers in this way: "whether they like it or not, Dawkins, Amis, Hitchens and company have become weapons in the war on terror." After 9/11 due to the amount of emotional and national sentiment related to security and loss, it is not even expected to speak about the causes of terrorists for undertaking such attack in America. Writer's ethnicity should not be a binding block for portraying an authentic terrorist figure. Writers should have more in depth study of the biography of the terrorists and at the same time they should know the geo-political, economical reasons linked to their becoming terrorist. In this regard Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of the terrorist figure is praiseworthy and rather more complete, authentic and understandable. On the other hand, John Updike's incomplete attempt to create an authentic Muslim terrorist and understanding his psychology leads to create a dehumanized figure of Ahmad. He is distanced from the reader as something poisonous unable to rectify in any circumstance. Instead of demonizing the terrorists out of some preconceived bias against Muslims (which retards the prospect neutral exploration of the characters), the writers should concentrate more exploring the issues and reasons related to the essentialization and the formation of the terrorists out of an essential human being. In this way only the writers will become the free agents of the world speaking and breaking all the retardation of free thinking.

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