



RESEARCH PAPER

Islamophobia and (Wes)toxication: A Hermeneutical and phenomenological reading of John Updike's *TERRORIST*

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ABSTRACT

This research takes up the dialectical presentation of *Terrorist* by John Updike to underscore the actively mediating presence of the reader(s) in treating meaning as an event. Drawing on Rosenblatt's 'aesthetic mode' of reading, this paper argues that the determinate and indeterminate meaning(s) of *Terrorist* perpetuate Islamophobia, ethnocentrism, and Eurocentrism in the (mis)informed reader. The central character of *Terrorist*, Ahmad, is systematically indoctrinated by the Imam, Shaikh Rashid, and simultaneously manipulated by the CIA operative, Charlie Chehab, to deliver 'Hutama' on the nonbelievers/Americans. The dialectical presentation of *Terrorist* invites the reader to see the Imam as inciting Ahmad to advance his suicidal mission. At the same time, there is some sort of balancing act at work with the CIA's active incitement to Ahmad to blow up Lincoln's Tunnel. While the 'West' here is also implicated in violent jihad and the hijacking of Ahmad's critical orientation, the primary mover is the Muslim prayer leader, and by extension, the place of worship, the mosque, the act of worship itself. So, as informed readers participate in the dialectics of meaning construction, they do so not in isolation, but in the (overbearing) presence of existing views, representations and prismatic constructions of Islam. In this sense the reader is (mis)informed to maintain and support stereotypes of Islam, which *Terrorist* is superficially questioning.

KEYWORDS (Re)symbolisation, Aesthetic Mode Of Reading, Islamophobia, Wes(toxication)

Introduction

Drawing on Reader Response Theory's binary mode of literary presentation, *Terrorist* evinces a dialectical presentation, as it "challenge[s] readers to establish their own meanings" (Davis and Womack, 2017, p, 82). Reader Response Theory deauthorizes the supremacy of the author; the informed readers look at the "meaning as an event" (Davis and Womack, 2017, p, 82). The informed readers have the "power to author particularised interpretations of the literary work at hand" (Davis and Womack, 2017, p, 83). In *Terrorist*, Ahmad is systematically indoctrinated by a religious fanatic, Shaikh Rashid, to drive an explosives-laden truck to Lincoln's Tunnel to crush American infidels and secure an afterlife in paradise. But the Imam is not alone. The CIA operative, Charlie Chehab, also urges Ahmad to carry out the suicidal mission. Chehab perpetuates Islamophobia, racism, and Eurocentrism by making Ahmad appear as the maladjusted Muslim youth in the overall scheme. Therefore, as the "symbiotic nature of the reading process" (Davis and Womack, 2017, p, 82) invites clashing interpretations of the suicide bombing mission (since

it is abetted by the CIA), the ultimate blame must be laid at the door of the Muslim community itself from where violent jihadist ideals emerge.

Disassociating the reader from the historical/authorial praxis, Iser “decontextualises and dehistoricises text and reader” (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 2016, p, 52). Decontextualisation and dehistoricisation place the reader at an advantage to negotiate with the decentering narrative of *Terrorist*. “The text provides an unsettling, decentering, or confusing reading experience” (Tyson, 2006, p, 177). Updike simultaneously exposes the deceit of the Western world near the end of *Terrorist* by blowing Charlie Chehab’s cover. This plot twist is Updike’s masterstroke that attempts to upend the interpretative paradigm. Shifting the blame from Shaikh Rashid to Charlie Chehab could be interpreted in multiple ways: 1) The Western world is not innocent when it comes to violent jihad. 2) The Muslim world and the Western world share the blame equally, in terms of inciting individuals to acts of violence (although for varying reasons). 3) Extremism has less to do with religion than with adjusting in society. 4) Islamophobia is often nurtured in the West, and certain views of Islam/ Muslims projected and perpetuated to sustain discursive hegemonies.

In the aesthetic mode of reading, the readers “experience a personal relationship to the text that focuses ... on the emotional subtleties of its [text’s] language and encourages us [the readers] to make judgments” (Tyson, 2006, p, 173). The informed reader looks for indeterminate meanings in the text. “Indeterminacy, refers to ‘gaps’ in the text ... such as actions that are not clearly explained or that seem to have multiple explanations” (Tyson, 2006, p, 174). In *Terrorist*, Shaikh Rashid and Charlie Chehab play a key role in setting Ahmad up against the West. The shenanigans of Shaikh Rashid and Chehab act as a device to ideologically indoctrinate Ahmad to carry out a suicide mission to cleanse the world of (at least some) infidels.

Literature Review

Herman (2015) argues in his article, “Terrorism and the Critique of American Culture: John Updike’s *Terrorist*” that Updike has tried to dig deep into the psychology of Ahmad to understand the motivations/workings of a potential terrorist’s mind. “By breaking the taboo against investigating the terrorist’s motivations and perspectives, let alone granting the terrorist an intelligent subjectivity, Updike invites his readers to think about Americans’ culture and place in the world” (Herman, 2015, p, 712). Ahmad is programmed into believing that a suicide attack on the infidels will make him superior to Shaikh Rashid: “With this glorious act, you will become my superior. You will leap ahead of me on the golden rolls kept in Heaven” (Updike, 2006, p, 269). The intense indoctrination drive that Ahmad is subjected to at the hands of Shaikh Rashid and Charlie Chehab is tilted to make him a sympathetic character in the perception of informed readers. To strengthen Ahmad’s resolve before driving the explosives-laden truck to Lincoln’s Tunnel, Shaikh Rashid asks Ahmad a leading question: “You have volunteered out of the fullness of your faith? ... and out of hatred for those who mock and ignore God” (Updike, 2006, p, 270). Here, Ahmad’s subject-hood, his agency to think, decide and act, seems to be under the control of Shaikh Rashid. So, the real villainy can be associated with the mastermind of a potential terrorist attack, Shaikh Rashid.

John-Paul Calgon (2009) explores in his article, “‘This Godless democracy’: Terrorism, Multiculturalism, and American Self-Criticism in John Updike”, the role of American society in manufacturing terrorists like Ahmad: “His [Updike’s] exploration of the layers of animosity behind the unspoken ‘I hate you’ of the suicide bomber is even more daring, when this figure is himself an American citizen and the product of a

multicultural union" (Calgon, 2009, p, 129). The dominant thrust on a godless democracy, America, combined with methods of indoctrination play a major role in shaping anti-American hatred in Ahmad. "I of course do not hate all Americans. But the American way is the way of infidels. It is headed for a terrible doom" (Updike, 2006, p, 39). In spite of a deep-rooted West(to)fixation, Ahmad looks at America as a godless democracy, which is destined to doom. The coloured vision of Ahmad gives projection to Updike's Islamophobic tendencies. The Muslim character, Ahmad, is presented as gullible, prone to violence, and anti-West at heart. Similarly, Shaikh Rashid preaches a passionate hatred of the West: "They [Infidels] are manifestations of Satan, and God will destroy them without mercy on the day of final reckoning. God will rejoice at their [infidels/Americans] suffering" (Updike, 2006, p, 77). Two Muslim characters are super-spreaders of violence and terrorism: Shaikh Rashid for nurturing hatred for the West and Ahmad for falling into the trap set up by Shaikh Rashid and Charlie Chehab.

Muhammad Safeer Awan (2010) in his article: "Global Terror and the Rise of Xenophobia/Islamophobia: An Analysis of American Cultural Production since September 11" highlights Western writers' tendency to peddle Islamophobia in their narratives. "The vilification of the Muslim community and their faith has been relentless among certain segments of the media and almost all political parties since 9/11 ... authors have been very focused in their campaign of demonising Islam as a faith and Muslims as a community" (Awan, 2010, p, 525). In *Terrorist*, Ahmad seems to be inspired by the teachings of the Quran to unleash violence on the Western world. "You shall be gratified with what your Lord will give you" (Updike, 2006, p, 232). This verse of the Quran is linked with killing all infidels. In the context of *Terrorist*, Shaikh Rashid recites this verse to Ahmad to convince him to blow up the explosives-laden truck to get a wholesome reward in the afterlife. Ahmad betrays a strong religious connection with Allah before embarking on a/an (un)holy mission of crushing the infidels: "My love of Allah is absolute" (Updike, 2006, p, 237).

Abdul Haseeb (2006) postulates in the article "The (Mis) Representation of Islam in John Updike's *Terrorist*" that Updike has painted Islam as a religion of violence and Muslims as perpetrators of violence. In *Terrorist*, Updike presents a demonic vision of Islam through Shaikh Rashid's character. Shaikh Rashid manufactures a utopia for Ahmad, inspired by a Quranic verse: "You [Ahmad] will not be there to experience it. You will already be in Jannah, in Paradise, at that instant [blowing up the truck], confronting the delighted face of God. He will greet you as His son" (Updike, 2006, p, 237). The seemingly Quranic-inspired picture is an odd combination by Updike. Human beings as God's children is a Biblical, rather than Quranic trope. Islam sets itself up against Christianity by its insistence on an absolutely transcendental, as opposed to an anthropomorphic, God. Suicide bombers becoming God's children on completion of their missions is thus Updike's prismatic view of jihadists.

A hermeneutical reading of *Terrorist* reveals that Ahmad is less of a villain than Shaikh Rashid and Charlie Chehab, the CIA operative. Ahmad deserves sympathy from the literary world for being manipulated by the agents of darkness: Shaikh Rashid and Charlie Chehab.

Material and Methods

Drawing on Rosenblatt's 'aesthetic mode' of reading, this paper argues that the determinate and indeterminate meaning(s) of *Terrorist* perpetuate Islamophobia, ethnocentrism, and Eurocentrism in the (mis)informed reader. This research deploys close textual analysis of the primary text, *Terrorist*, and the secondary sources to encourage

(de)toxification of textual biases, authorial intervention(s), and pre-established meaning(s).

Islamophobia and (Wes)toxification in *Terrorist*

Ahmad's ideological orientation is hijacked by the agents of imperialism: Shaikh Rashid (who wants an Islamic emirate and Charlie Chehab representing the CIA). He is systematically trained to look at the Western culture as a foil to Islam: "the college track exposed me [Ahmad] to corrupting influences ... bad philosophy and bad literature. Western culture is godless" (Updike, 2006, p, 38). In *Terrorist*, 'godless Western society' is a metaphor to rouse the ire of conservative Muslim characters. The informed reader demystifies the seemingly indeterminate/slippery meaning(s) of a godless Western society as an attempt to portray Americans/Westerners as liberal and Muslims as deeply conservative in their belief system. Shaikh Rashid implicitly instills ill-will in Ahmad against the Western community by repeatedly asking him to 'drive a truck' – an explosive metaphor for a terrorist attack on the infidels/Westerners – "My teacher thinks I should drive a truck" (Updike, 2006, p, 41). Ahmad's potential terrorist attack is deliberately overloaded with religious overtones to camouflage the entrenched Islamophobic dialectic underlining the text. The (re)symbolisation of the informed reader identifies this authorial trap, set up to misrepresent the Muslim community as terrorists.

The use of Quranic verses (some real, some made up) in *Terrorist* betrays the underlying Islamophobia mentioned above. Updike's chicanery to cast Muslims as terrorists: " 'My teacher [Shaikh Rashid] at the mosque says that all unbelievers are our enemies. The Prophet said that eventually all unbelievers must be destroyed' " (Updike, 2006, p, 68). Shaikh Rashid is presented as a passionate defender of the Muslim faith. In the guise of a religious mentor, Shaikh Rashid is instilling hatred against nonbelievers to the point of eliminating them from this world.

Shaikh Rashid's stream of invectives against nonbelievers/ Americans is cleverly disguised in a Quranic verse: "Let not the infidels deem that the length of day we give them is good for them! We only give them length of days that they may increase their sins! And a shameful chastisement shall be their lot" (Updike, 2006, p, 76). Shaikh Rashid whips up enthusiasm in Ahmad about his violent enterprise: conducting a suicide attack to inflict harm on the nonbelievers. Updike as self-appointed interpreter of Quranic verses feels that God has issued his verdict about nonbelievers that they will face chastisement.

Charlie Chehab believes that Muslims are guided by their Jihadist tendencies to inflict harm on America. "They are enemy soldiers ... They are dangerous men. They wish to destroy America ... They think Nine-Eleven was a great joke. It is war for them. It is Jihad" (Updike, 2006, p, 149). Chehab looks at the attacks on the Twin Towers as Jihad ... a holy war waged by Muslims to erase Western civilization. Chehab himself instigates Ahmad to blow himself up: a daring act to crush the infidels. Chehab's cover is blown towards the end of *Terrorist*; a major turning point that symbolises the West's complicity in crimes committed against the West. This plot twist shows Updike's ability to look inward: blaming the CIA machinery for the horrendous crimes committed in the U.S.A.

Ahmad's thoughtful exchange with Charlie Chehab speaks volumes about his anti-West hatred: " '[Charlie asks] You are with the Jihad?' 'How could I [Ahmad] not be? Muhammad is Allah's apostle. Those who follow him are ruthless to the unbelievers but merciful to one another' " (Updike, 2006, p, 183). In Updike, Ahmad's penchant for destruction is connected with the teachings of the Quran. While Jack acknowledges some of gaps in Western society, "The crazy Arabs are right ... hedonism, nihilism, that's all we

[Western world] offers" (Updike, 2006, p, 205), these very gaps provide a rationale to the Muslim characters to assail the West for its godless society and unbridled hedonism. In other words, the old dictum, "They hate us for who we are", is repeated.

The guardians of the Muslim faith, Imams are charged with inciting acts of violence against Americans. "There are some imams ... they all preach terrible things against America, but some of them go beyond that, I mean in advocating violence against the state" (Updike, 2006, p, 134). In this way, *Terrorist* evinces a dialectical presentation as it "challenge[s] readers to establish their own meanings" (Davis and Womack, 2017, p, 82). The informed reader can sense Updike's strategic maneuver to profile the Muslim world. In *Terrorist*, Shaikh Rashid paints a utopian picture of afterlife to whip Ahmad into a religious frenzy: "You shall be gratified with what your Lord will give you" (Updike, 2006, p, 232). Despite his implication of the CIA, Updike ends up projecting an orientalist view of Islam.

As the Imam exhorts Ahmad – "With this glorious act [suicide attack], you [Ahmad] will become my superior. You will leap ahead of me on the golden rolls kept in Heaven" (Updike, 2006, p, 269) – hatching a conspiracy to eliminate the infidels/Americans is presented as a glorious enterprise. The images of paradise excite Ahmad's imagination to do the unthinkable; blow himself up for otherworldly rewards. British and French Orientalists often presented Muslims as trapped in unreal flights of fancy. The Muslim paradise was all about sensual/ sexual pleasure, and Muslim men could be convinced to do anything to obtain their seventy-odd virgins. In Updike, Shaikh Rashid invokes the power of divine help to reaffirm his commitment to violence: "God never deserts those who wage war on His behalf. *Allahu akbar*" (Updike, 2006, p, 271). Ahmad resolves to deliver a *coup de grace* to the infidels by detonating the truck at Lincoln's Tunnel: "Ahmad hastens to deliver Hutama, the Crushing Fire. More precisely, Shaikh Rashid once explained, Hutama means *that which breaks to pieces*" (Updike, 2006, p, 287).

Charlie Chelab employs a critical reference from the Quran to strengthen Ahmad's resolve to commit the terrorist attack on the infidels: "The enemy will have relaxed their defenses, like the men of the elephant before the assault of birds" (Updike, 2006, p, 275). The men of the elephant wanted to invade Kaaba, but their wicked plans were foiled by the attack from the birds. Similarly, Ahmad can deal a terrible blow to the Western civilization by acting as a soldier from the bird's party. A young Muslim can easily be duped into thinking he is reliving the unsuccessful invasion of the Kaaba. The Muslim man remains highly gullible, oversexed and myopic.

Updike also seems to be borrowing from Egyptian Islamist thinker, Sayyid Qutub, to peddle Islamophobia: "But the concept of *Jahiliyya*, meaning the state of ignorance that existed before Mohammed extends also to worldly Muslims and makes them legitimate targets for assassination" (Updike, 2006, p, 302). In presenting the Muslim view of America, Updike seems to be paraphrasing Sayyid Qutub: "No people is more distant than the American people from God and piety" (Updike, 2006, p, 302). The alienation from God gives a rationale to the Muslim world to initiate acts of terror against the West.

Jack Levy averts a potential terrorist attack on Americans by subjecting Ahmad to an eye-opening question: " 'I can't believe you're seriously intending to kill hundreds of innocent people' " (Updike, 2006, p, 294). Ahmad stands ready to detonate the truck, but a lapsed Jew, Jack Levy, convinces him not to. Updike redeems humanity through Jack Levy's character. In sharp contrast to Ahmad's belligerent traits, Jack Levy is painted as a symbol of rationality, humanity, and maturity. He makes all-out efforts to stop Ahmad

from embarking on a (self)destructive mission. His timely intervention strengthens the reader's faith in humanity.

Ahmad finally has a rude awakening about Charlie Chehab's association with the CIA. "Evidently Charlie was CIA undercover and the other side finally figured it out" (Updike, 2006, p, 290). Jack Levy awakens Ahmad to a stark reality: Charlie Chehab was an undercover CIA agent working to hijack Ahmad's vision of life. This serves as a turning point in *Terrorist* as Ahmad's intense hatred for the West seems to have been borrowed from a Western spy: Charlie Chehab. In the same vein, Shaikh Rashid also flees the scene in Western dress. This situation helps Ahmad realise he has been a pawn. He is not elevated to the status of a hero, nor does he redeem himself.

In the wake of a world-shattering revelation, Jack awakens Ahmad to the dangers of CIA conspiracies: "Anybody tries to bully you, remind them you were set up by a CIA operative, in a sting operation of very dubious legality. You're a victim, Ahmad ... a fall guy" (Updike 309). Ahmad abandons the terrorist attack on the infidels/Americans and revisits his philosophy of life. Backpedaling on his CIA-inspired rigidity, Ahmad ironically remarks: "These devils, Ahmad thinks, have taken away my God" (Updike, 2006, p, 310). Against all reader(ly) expectations, a lapsed Jew, Jack Levy, blows Charlie Chehab's cover to rescue humanity from another horrendous blunder: loss of innocent American lives under the auspices of a CIA-inspired Islamophobic terrorist attack.

Conclusion

Drawing on the actively mediating presence of the informed reader in the dialectical presentation of *Terrorist*, the text is perpetuating Islamophobia. Even if the would-be suicide bomber Ahmad is characterized as a victim of ideological indoctrination at the hands of two shadowy figures (the religious extremist, Shaikh Rashid, and the CIA-operative, Charlie Chehab), Ahmad's naivety as the maladjusted Muslim man restates Orientalist tropes in twenty-first century America. A hermeneutical/phenomenological reading of *Terrorist* encourages (de)toxification of textual biases, authorial intervention(s), and pre-established meaning(s).

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