

JOHN UPDIKE'S *TERRORIST*: A PORTRAYAL OF TERRORISM AS A SERIOUS THREAT TO WORLD PEACE

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Abstract

Updike is a keen observer of contemporary social situation depicts terrorism, the real curse to the world in 21st century. In the novel 'Terrorist', Updike trace out the way evil minded religious people exploit the helplessness of the adolescent youth and lead them towards malevolent deeds. The manipulation of misinterpretation of religious teaching with vested interest by some culprits in the society creates the threat to the world peace. Updike has explored domestic discord and resultant problems once again in the changing situation of America. The research paper concentrates upon the raising terrorist activities with racist disclosure which instigates Updike's treatment of secularism, Christianity and Judaism to help highlight the fatal issue in his novel 'Terrorist'. The novel is the result of the September 11 attack on USA that made Updike to turn towards the subject like Terrorism for his novel which seems different from his area of writing at the last stage of his life and writing career. He is trapped by the religious teaching of the Yemeni imam, Shaikh Rashid who insinuates him to drive the truck of fertilizer and racing fuel intended to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel. The novel seeks to explore the lurking fundamentalism and its repercussion on personal and social life of Ahmad who represents the predicament of contemporary adolescent youth.

Keywords: Secularism, Judaism, Insinuation, Fundamentalism, Martyrdom, Salvation

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Terrorism is the real curse to 21st century world today. It disturbs peace and kills innocent citizens. It has been proved the greatest threat to the world peace. The recent terrorist attacks in all parts of world represent the common situation all over the world. Even the world power America cannot be escaped from these terrorist attacks from some evil groups of terrorist minds. The nations like India, Afganistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, France, Bangladesh, etc. are the worst sufferers of terrorist attacks on their land killing number of innocent citizens. Recently, USA's Manhattan is stricken by terrorist attack however India too got an attack on an army camp killing 18 soldier in Uri sector, Jammu and Kashmir. Terrorists attacked in London, Madrid, Chechenya in Russia amongst many others which had highlighted the cruelty of this menace. Names such as Osama Bin-Laden, Dawood Ibrahim, Maulana Mashood Azhar amongst many others have also become notorious due to the myriad attacks that they have been held responsible for across the world. This reality of terrorism has become the matter of real worry which can bring the world peace in great danger. These terrorist activities are generally carried out on religious reason however they are also tempted with economic, socialism, regionalism and politics.

Updike for the first time has attempted to give you the record of the mind of putative terrorist when he executes any terrorist activity to kill people. It is very difficult to trace the cause of hatred of the society. The terrorist may be motivated by a hatred of the nation's foreign policy or by religious fervor, worldly disappointment, or by nihilistic love of death or they may be the victims of the teaching of evil minded religious people who exploit the helplessness of the adolescent youth and lead them towards malevolent deeds. The manipulation of misinterpretation of religious teaching with vested interest by some culprits in the society creates the threat to the society and world peace. The novel also emerges as the alarm to the world after 9/11 terrorist attack on America. Robert Stone in his "Updike's Other America" writes about the fateful terrorist attack on America as:

Sept. 11, 2001, was the day all eyes turned heavenward there, and hundreds of the sons and daughters of New Jersey died. New York, like the city of Ad in the Koran, was struck for its wealth and pride, and it was as though the dark and hateful underside of our own religious traditions had come for us, to the satisfaction of Osama bin Laden and Jerry Falwell. (Stone³)

In the novel *Terrorist* Updike accuses some religious preachers for their non-believing Christianity and lack of true faith in God for turning their followers to the wrong way of salvation. This track in most cases put the life of innocent civilians in trouble which has been observed in his novel *Terrorist*. These people tempt innocent youths to sacrifice for religion to be pure and call “they are men and women like any others, full of lust and fear and infatuation with things that can be bought.” (Updike, *Terrorist* 5) But these people are deliberately made terrorist and create threat to the global peace which is the major focus of present research paper.

The novel is the result of the September 11 attack on USA that made Updike to turn towards the subject like Terrorism for his novel which seems different from his area of writing at the last stage of his life and writing career. Updike also discusses the other factor like domestic irresponsibility of parents responsible for turning children to the part of terrorist groups. The novel *Terrorist* is the story of 18 year old boy Ahmad who became Terrorist because of his parents’ negligence and irresponsible separation. Though he is highly intelligent, he couldn’t continue his studies and decides to be Terrorist for becoming purer than the Koran. The protagonist Ahmad Mulloy is an American high school boy. He is half-Irish and half-Egyptian by background who is intoxicated by Yemeni imam who is his high school religious teacher. The novel depicts the religious teaching and violent aggressiveness of Islam by the name of ‘Jihad’ which hunt Ahmad, who has raised his faith in religious martyrdom.

At one end, this is the story of sacrifice of the protagonist who is ready to spend his life for his religion. The novel is a part of an accumulation literature in which novelists has tried to grope their way in to the mind of the extremist. It is the story of the teachers, weak Christians and non-observant of Jews, make a show of teaching virtue and righteous self-restraint but their shifty eyes and hollow voices betray their lack of belief. The novel also represents one’s hatred towards society who turns the religious non-believer ready to participate in terrorist activities and take innocent lives. The author has described the theme of religious hysteria and disillusionment by thinking Islamic fervor. Ahmad easily sacrifice his plans for his further education or get into

the serious relationship but spend his time with dubious imam at a small mosque besides his high rank in his high school education.

The terrorist portrayed in the novel is an eighteen year old American Muslim who is on the edge of his graduation from New Jersey high school as described in the beginning of novel. He is the only child of a short-lived union between a lapsed Catholic Irish descent mother and an irresponsible Egyptian exchange student whose ancestors had been from the muddy fields of the overflowing Nile. He lacked the guidance from his family because of the separation of his parents and look beyond his fatherless and spiritually impoverished home for guidance. Ahmad's involvement with Islam depends only on his father's being a Muslim and his family circumstances.

Ahmad's mother is liberal on religious ground and not ready to be bound with the restrictions of the religion on her and her child. Her son on the other hand is curious for religious philosophy of Islam and he is ready to be bound with the restrictions for his religion. The author has tried to show the controversy between Ahmad's faith and his godless life as Ahmad thinks it the life like "Devils". These devils seek to take away my God. All day long at Central High School girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair." (Updike 3) Ahmad is not amused by listening music or use of cell phone, or lust after girls or movies or reading books but thinks of his God and spends most of his time in the Mosque with his imam Rashid. Ahmad is curious for knowing of what happens of the body of creatures like worms, snails when they die on street and the sun dries their body, his imam tells him the sacred myth of angel Gabriel. Even at the time of watching television he seeks for traces of God in his infidel society and thinks of ordinary Americans as devils who try to take his faith from him. He develops hatred towards society and decides to be purer than the Koran.

Ahmad's mother, Teresa Mulloy is a long separated wife of his Egyptian father who is flirtatious and develops comparative openness towards sexuality. She has shallow attraction to other cultures which apparently makes her to marry Ahmad's father and on the other hand believes in the liberty of her son to be left alone to realize his own potentials without parent's influence on his development. Terry, besides being a loving and laudably hardworking single mother, really fits a set of stereotypes even caricatures of what a modern "liberal" woman is supposed to be. She establishes relationships with many men and becomes the reason of Ahmad's hatred. She begins an affair with Jack Levy, a sixty three years old student counsel or

at Ahmad's high school. Though the affair seems least important in the story but seems the need of such entanglements to allow author to regularize his ration of sex writing and his love to describe phallus rampant. She worries if Jack would need to quit their relationship due to the knowledge of his wife Beth. She thinks as:

....if her tacky relationship with this melancholy old loser of a guidance counsel or were in fact to end. At the age of forty she has parted from a number of men, and how many of them would she want back? (ibid 157)

Jack Levy the another main character in this novel has the second point of focus of its elliptical plot whose relationships allows the plot to deviate from where Ahmad's circular ideology could have taken it. Jack in certain sense Ahmad's alter ego who has frustration on American education system and the nihilistic materialism of modern American secularism. Jack Levy initially visits Teressa Mulloy and tries to steer Ahmad to enroll in Community College. He has an affair with Terry who also has abandoned to practice her religion. He is the critic of American culture and considers it as the outcome of naked greed. Jack struggles with mixed feelings of kindness and pity towards Ahmad but provide no permanent solution to the elusive problems of evil. Terry has no idea about Ahmad's change of mind and religion. She said, "I have no idea why he thinks he wants to drive a truck. It's an idea he picked up from his imam—not his mama, his imam. The dear child calls himself a Muslim." (ibid 111) Even we know about Jack's religious attachment besides his not following any religion when Hermione and his wife Beth talk about terrorist activities in America and peoples joining to those groups, "If the rabbis start in, Jack'll have to join up. Though he never goes to temple. He might be happier if he did." (ibid 106) Jack visits Ahmad's flirty forty- year –old single mother in their affair that makes Ahmad angry that is described as a nicely lyrical broth:

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. (ibid 75)

They also both ambivalently long for sex outside of marriage. Jack needs Terry to remind him of a more robust and vital past, when he had a surer familial and carnal footing.

Saikh Rashid uses different tricks to harangue Ahmad about the depravity of the West and the emptiness of life. He tells him like “Did you not discover that the world in its American portion emits a stench of waste and greed, of sensuality and futility?” (Updike 109) He teaches him that the modernity and secularism in American society are the evils of humanity. The non-Muslims are devils and must be burnt in Hell for their sin and destroyed without pity and the good Muslims must reject deep social attachments and prepare for the ultimate purity of paradise with their sacrifice to the religion. He calls them “manifestation of Satan, and God will destroy them without mercy on the day of final reckoning. God will rejoice at their suffering” (ibid 62) Besides being able for Higher education, Ahmad readily applies for vocational truck driving license on the advice of his Yemini teacher after his high school pass out.

His imam is described in the context as “Rashid—a man slight and slim as a dagger, with a dangerous slyness about him, implying at moments that the Qur’an may not have eternally pre-existed in Paradise.” (ibid 115) It also seems throughout the novel that Updike has studied Koran thoroughly because the novel has many quotations from the Koran. But finally the novel leaves the impression about Islam that it is the religion that preaches violence and turns the innocent souls into a blood sucking monster. The aggressive belief in religion turns human into a robot who at some point abandoned any serious attempt to depict his inner life. Though Ahmad did not succeed in the accomplishment of his mission, his easy acceptance of it confuses readers about his purpose and understanding of religious faith and life.

John Updike had best homework of Koran before the novel to be written on the occasion of the terrorist attack of 9/11. He busies thinking about the terrorists’ mind. Ahmad has no friends, no siblings, an absent father and a mother whom he has barely seen. Besides this loneliness he feels that God is always with him as a close vein in his neck. His restlessness is described by the author as

He punches the radio off again. In this devilish society there is nothing fit for a man in his last hour to hear. Silence is better. Silence is God’s music. Ahmad must be clean to meet God. (ibid 219)

Jack shows deep concern with Ahmad who prevents him from his plan of executing himself with explosive laden truck in Lincoln Tunnel. Jack reveals to Ahmad that the terrorist plot was a government sting and that his friend and co-conspirator Charlie Chehab was actually a CIA undercover agent who had his cover blown and was beheaded by others involved in the plot. Jack also admits his affair with Ahmad's mother for last several months and anyhow convinces Ahmad to reconsider his interpretation of Islam that God does not want him to kill anyone through his life and makes him to ride through Manhattan together and return to New Jersey by abandoning his terrorist attack.

In this way, it can be concluded that *Terrorist* has the depiction terrorism throughout the story. We can see the religious impact on Ahmad leads him to the destructive path. However the terrorism under the name of religion, false patriotic fever, regionalism or some other motives has proved to be real threat to the world. The world has to join hands to fight against these evil acts of killing innocents all around. Terrorism has been insidiously affecting lives all over the world and has resulted in spoiling the world peace at an alarming rate. May it be a super power like United States of America or a developing country like India, terrorism continues to spread its roots with no concrete solution.

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