



Rebirth of Orientalism in John Updike's Terrorist

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ولادة الإشراف من جديد في فيلم الارهابي لجون ابدايك

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Abstract:

The intricacies of identity among individuals of Arabic origin in America are further complicated when Islamic ideology gets a stranglehold on their minds. John Updike's novel provides a fertile ground to observe, analyse and come to a conclusion regarding Orientalism - which is defined as Arabs and Islam in the novels context - and what it comprises of and its contribution to the American society. The indoctrination and radicalization of Ahmad, the eighteen year old protagonist and the negative influence of the company he keeps gives a contrary impression of Orientalism and typecasts Muslims as terrorists. Such branding ups the ante of hostility leaving hatred in its wake. However, brainwashing can be made ineffective and neutralized by rational thought and reason and the true essence of Orientalism can be depicted before the world. A rebirth of Orientalism in America can be brought about when the Arab Muslims, through their action present an accurate and correct picture of their beliefs.

Keywords: terrorism, orientalism, radicalization, indoctrination, Islam, teenagers

المخلص:

وتزداد تعقيدات الهوية بين الافراد من أصل عربي في أمريكا تعقيدا عندما تسيطر الايديولوجية الإسلامية على عقولهم توفر رواية جون ابدايك أرض خصبه الملاحظة والتحليل والتواصل الى استنتاجات فيما يتعلق بالإشراف الذي يعرب بالعرب والاسلام في سباق الرواية .وما يتألف منه ومساهمته في المجتمع الامريكي . ان تلقين أحمد بطل الرواية البالغ من العمر ثمانية عشر عاما وتطرقه والتأثير السلبي الرفقة التي يحتفظ بها . ويعطي انطبعا مخالف للإشراف ويصور المسلمين على انهم أرهابيون مثل هذا الوسم يزيد من حدة العداء ويترك الكراهية في اعقابه . ومع ذلك يمكن جعل غسل الدماغ غير فعال وتحبيده بالفكر والعقل العقلاني ويمكن تصوير الجوهر الحقيقي للإشراف امام العالم . ان ولادة الإشراف من جديد في أمريكا يمكن ان تتم عندما يقدم المسلمون العرب من خلال أفعالهم . صورة دقيقة وصحيحة عن معتقدات .

Introduction

Having donned multiple hats with his contributions to various literary genres that include article writing, criticism, playwriting, poetry and fiction, American writer John Updike was among the select few to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction twice. The prolific writer appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine two times, underlying the immense significance of the influence of his writings. He started his career by writing a column titled 'Talk of the Town' for *The New Yorker*. As a novelist, he debuted with *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), and continued to gain recognition with his later work *The Same Door* (1959), a collection of sixteen short stories. His claim to fame and prominence came with his best known work, the 'Rabbit' series. The first of the series, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), courted controversy for its explicit sexual content. The theme of sex in John Updike's writings depict sex as a mirror to the shifting sexual mores in America from the 1950s onwards. His other favourite theme of spirituality reflects his own struggles with his Christian faith. His novel *The Centaur* (1963) won the National Book Award and his short story "The Bulgarian Poetess," (1965) won him the first O. Henry Prize. Updike's predilection for the small-town middle class Protestant Americans became an inspiration for his characters as he was fascinated by the ambiguity in their lives. He captured the essence of America in his works by touching almost every aspect of it that influences

an American. Updike published sixty novels in his lifetime, each of great merit. He won accolades throughout his distinguished career. He is duly placed in the pantheon of all-time great American writers and was the greatest of his generation.

The Context of Orientalism in the Novel

The west and the east have always been polar opposites in more ways than one. Especially, when it comes to culture, ideology and characteristics of a people. That distinction is created through religion and its practices. In *Terrorist*, John Updike has presented that stark contrast, and therefore, an imminent clash between the the interpretations of the teachings of Islam, an oriental religion and the values of freedom, liberty and equality - the essence of America. Moreover, the propagation of radical Islamic beliefs of Islam that are branded on the minds of impressionable American Muslim youth, and inciting them to mindless violence and killings of infidels in the name of jihad, are explicitly communicated by the author. The teenage protagonist, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, is an American citizen by birth born to an Egyptian Muslim father and a Catholic mother. By adding the character of a Jewish school counsellor, the author completes the context of Orientalism in the novel. And through that, Updike has unequivocally mooted the clash of civilizations in the mind of Ahmad with the backdrop of the 9/11 attacks. To equate Islam in its true form with orientalism

is an attempt made by the author in right earnest. The misconceptions held by the Americans about Islam and its beliefs after 9/11 led to a deep hatred for Muslims and making way for Islamophobia, which in turn caused resentment among the practitioners of Islam who did not subscribe to the extremist interpretation of Islam which was propagandized by hate-mongering Islamic religious leaders.

Through *Terrorist*, Updike has proposed to define orientalism and by doing so, has successfully revealed its true attributes - the characteristics that are in sync with humanity and brotherhood. But only after exposing the venomous and hate-filled workings of some Islamic preachers who twist the Koranic teachings to promote terrorism. Orientalism in the novel can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, from the viewpoint of the west after the 9/11 attacks, and secondly, from the events that unfold in the novel. After the September 11 attacks on America, Muslims are viewed with suspicion and distrust. The rising hate crimes against them have been well documented and bear testimony to the hate they receive. Ahmad too experiences that he is considered an outsider when he is told that "you're looking way serious" and "you should learn to smile more." By bringing up Ahmad's appearance, Updike blurs the lines between racism and the east, making both of them synonyms for 'outcast' in America, and therefore, making Ahmad

deprived of the sense of belonging. Ahmad's faith in his religion of Islam is guided by a "striving, along the path of God. It can mean inner struggle," but the psychological conditioning that he receives from imam takes him to the path of terrorism in the name of Islam.

Additionally, the question of whether western lifestyle is compatible with the people of the east also needs to be examined. Primarily, it can be said with certitude that integration and blending between two cultures is as easy as it gets if each respects the other. The problem only arises when the failure of one to assimilate and object to the others' beliefs and religion stirs trouble. That attitude is completely unacceptable in modern society. Ahmad lives in America which is a very accommodating and liberal society that gives him the liberty to practice his faith. His false assumption that "America wants to take away [his] God" may have taken root because "he finds no similarities in the people around himself." (Mansutti, 2011). By imposing his Islamic beliefs on American people, Ahmad shows unmistakable signs of intolerance and an identity that separates himself from others, and therefore, considers them to be his enemies. The holier-than-thou belief acts as a catalyst in Ahmad's thought process which creates psychological barriers in his consciousness leading him to become radicalized and a fundamentalist. If that is the kind of Orientalism

that is on display in the west, the western world cannot be blamed to have a negative view of the east and its beliefs.

However, the conflict in Ahmad's mind was a result of the conditioning he received from the imam. But he not going ahead with the planned terrorist attack and making the decision to abort his mission was based on the true tenets of one of the faiths of the orient – Islam, which stands for peace and harmony. Updike has weaved a story that makes the reader compelled to ponder on the eastern mind and the manner in which it functions. The influence of religion on the people of the east, Muslims in this case, is very heavy and fundamentalist Islamic religious leaders are ready to take advantage of the intense faith of the gullible people and use them as tools to exploit them for their own fanatic propaganda. But not all fall prey to their nonsensical interpretations of Islam. In Ahmad's instance, he is a teen born to parents of different cultures. Furthermore, his father abandoned him and his mother and was raised in a neglectful manner. In such a scenario, it becomes a bit challenging for the individual to identify their roots and live a culturally connected life. Ahmad trying to find solace in religion and the answers to life's questions was a natural thing to do because his mind was troubled. He was a sitting duck for the imam but his discrimination got him to make the right decision of dropping the idea of carrying out a terrorist attack and that

signalled the rebirth of Orientalism in Ahmad in its true form and nature.

Ahmad and his Religion Conundrum

Terrorist must be seen with the perspective of the spiritual and religious churning that takes place in Ahmad's thought process to understand the Orientalism in him. His faith is rock solid but misplaced. His beliefs are strictly about submission to what's mentioned in Islamic scriptures and he fails to fathom them in an insightful or scholarly manner. He believes his subjugation to imam Shaikh Rashid is the beginning and end of practicing the Islamic way of life, without referring to authentic interpretations or cross-checking his teachings. His contempt, disdain and abhorrence for the people around him, because they are infidels, is due to his reason being blinded with what he believes to be America's "moral exhaustion and reprobation." (Stone, 2006). Ahmad's indoctrination makes him take it upon himself to clean up the American society he lives in because he thinks that God "employs simple men to shape the world." He was convinced that he had taken the "straight path" and headed for Jannah. Ahmad's steps towards his own radicalization are interrelated to his spiritual nature and a need to depend on God. The roots of the causes of an eighteen year old to turn to his religion with a sense of fervour lie

in the happenings of his life and to cope with them, he needed a power that he could trust.

Therefore, his state of mind has to be taken into consideration in the context of his trust in the imam's version of Islam. To take recourse to religion lies in Ahmad's sorrow of having an irresponsible and careless mother – "After all, for Ahmad, an upbringing by his mother alone was inadequate." (Alghamdi, 2015). And a father who disowned him. His passion towards religion lies on his belief of God's eternal love which he attempts to seek by being a devout Muslim and following the scriptures without demystifying the figurativeness in it. Also, his quest for meaning of life and the manner in which he could put his own to good use drives him to live the words of his religious texts. Despite his mixed heritage, his pull towards his father's religion can be attributed to his mother's liberal and secular beliefs. In picking the religion of the Orient to do his interpretation of God's bidding, Ahmad got it all wrong with the brainwashing he received from Shaikh Rashid. He wants to walk on the path of piousness and holiness but his fierce distinction between people for reasons other than religion, seeps into his beliefs that have no place for people who are different than him in any other way. Be it their skin colour or the way they live their lives. Ahmad's drifting away from inclusiveness and humanitarian values denotes the other side of

Islam, which, if interpreted the wrong way, can make zealots out of the faithful.

Moreover, the hatred in Ahmad manifests into him almost becoming a terrorist of the orient. That is so because, though he is an American citizen, his life is guided by the teachings of Shaikh Rashid, which he mistakes for the teachings of the Koran. Ahmad considers infidels as “sex-obsessed” and a “distraction” and “make him realize that their religion is a wrong one.” (Dilaga, 2012). Again, Ahmad cannot distinguish between culture and faith. Each and every behaviour of the American infidels is seen by him through the lenses of religion. His immense hatred for anyone who is not a Muslim and anything that does not adhere to the concepts of Islam is supposed to be wiped out from the face of the earth. Additionally, he imbibes racist views and does not even spare his mother from his mental diatribe. The radicalized opinions that Ahmad held are the views propagated by Islamist extremists and imam Shaikh Rashid was one of them. If religion is “the opium of the people,” (Marx, 1843), then religious preachers are its chapmen. Ahmad’s leaning and inclination towards fundamentalism was further propelled by his desire to be in “Jannah” (Islamic paradise). Little did he know, that beneath his conscious extremist views lay a firmer belief that defined real Orientalism.

The Muslim, the Jew and the Christian

The relation between Ahmad and his high school guidance counsellor Jack Levy is an aspect that needs to be analysed from the Orientalist point of view. Though Jack is a Jew, he calls himself an outsider because he is not a practicing Jew. He has Ahmad's best interests at heart and persuades him to have a college education as he has good grades. He sees a bright future for Ahmad and sees him to be a first-class professional in the job market. Updike has created a bond between two individuals whose faiths have been at loggerheads since centuries but that does not create any bitterness between the two. So what made Ahmad stop from making Jack his first victim? Also, why didn't Jack hate Ahmad? Can it be concluded that as Judaism and Islam, both, originated in the east, their core beliefs were inherently present in their nature and therefore they were subconsciously following their respective tenets that preach peace? The answer can be found in the land where the novel unfolds – America. The United States has been a melting pot for people of different cultures and faiths, making it a world within a world. The people of America are united in their diversity rather than any other reason. If that was not so, Teresa, a Catholic, would not have married an Egyptian immigrant and borne Ahmad.

Therefore, the Orientalism in the novel needs to be looked upon in its entirety through the faiths of the characters and the roles they play. Updike has sent out subtle messages regarding faith and it can be vouched with his own struggles with his faith in real life. The complexity and the bitter history between Judaism, Christianity and Islam makes a confluence in America, i.e., the west and through the interactions of the characters defines Orientalism. The only exception is Ahmad, who is unaware that all the three religions are Abrahamic and the scripture of each acknowledges the others. Updike has portrayed the two extremes of Islam. At one end is Shaikh Rashid and at the other end is Ahmad, though he is indoctrinated. That's very interesting because Ahmad does not go ahead with the planned terrorist attack. Consequently, he represents Islam, through deeds, that was hidden by the imam. *Terrorist* is a novel that Updike has written with the beliefs that an individual carries with them through their faith. Moreover, the presence of extremist Muslims cannot be denied but the author also underlines the fact that not all Muslims subscribe to the opinions of zealots and the Koranic interpretation of the fundamentalists.

Also, Teresa's liberal and secular beliefs are on display through the decisions she made in life. She married a Muslim Egyptian migrant and bore Ahmad with him. She never objected to Ahmad's following of Islam and spending time in the mosque, though her

husband who abandoned her and her son was a Muslim. When Ahmad requests her to wear a headscarf at his graduation, she agrees respecting his sentiments as a Muslim. Her short-lived affair with Jack too did not bring his Jewish roots in the equation. Nor did Teresa's Christian faith for Jack. Besides, Jack having a soft corner for Ahmad seems to belie the animosity between the Jews and the Muslims. It can also be argued that the land of America provides an opportunity for the people of the orient to put aside their differences and live in harmony. To a certain extent, that's true. But on digging deeper it is clear that the message about Orientalism that is delivered in the novel is about its belief in humanity. By doing so, "Updike creates a new America in the process." (Batchelor, 2009). That new America is a place after the 9/11 attacks where Orientalist faiths reconciled after the radical Islamic terror attacks on their country – the United States.

The East and The West

An insight into the novel reveals that the confusion in Ahmad's mind originates because he fails to understand the difference between religion and culture. eastern countries are known by the religion they represent. The same cannot be said of the western countries. The reason is not hard to fathom. The populations in the east take religion seriously. That's not the case in America. Ahmad's objection and criticism of his friends' behaviour and their

manner of living, and also of the general American population, is based on what his religion – Islam – considers to be permissible or not permissible. The faculty of reason is found lacking in Ahmad as he fails to distinguish the diversity in the way of living in the west. Ironically, he too is an American citizen but his radicalized consciousness is deeply rooted in dos and don'ts that have no foundations in the realm of logic. The contentious issue with Ahmad was that he wanted to impose his beliefs and faith on everyone whilst forgetting that he too had Christian blood in him, and by birth, was a part of American culture. Instead of being secular and letting people practice their faith, the protagonist goes against the American values system.

Furthermore, his obsession with annihilating the infidels and thinking it to be God's command for him cannot be equated with an eastern thought in anyway. That is so because "Updike omits any clear-cut judgment of the moral rights and wrongs of terrorism but instead accentuates the paradoxical nature of religious experience within a secular and technologically dominated world" (Richter, 2008). By that observation, the east cannot be called secular. And by the east, what is meant there are the Islamic countries as it is very difficult to find people of other faiths with a sizeable population among those nations. And yet again, the question of compatibility of the east with the west arises. The west has over centuries, embraced and welcomed diversity but the same

cannot be said of the Islamic countries in the Orient. The fundamental difference between the west and the east is their attitude towards secularism. Updike also hints at the advantage that radical Islamists take of the secularism of America which allows them to practice their faith even after they spew venom on the very country that provides them food and shelter. However, through Ahmad's turnaround at the end of the novel, he also highlights that fundamentalists don't always succeed because not all Muslims can be radicalized.

Ultimately, what binds the people from the east and the west is the common belief in goodness and the desire to uphold moral integrity. In the novel, John Updike has effectively portrayed the characteristics of the Orient. The good and the bad. By showcasing the victory of Ahmad's discrimination with his decision to abort his terror mission, by making Jack talk sense into Ahmad and by making Teresa a secular lady, Updike has encompassed all the traits of the orient. And by scripting an end that ends well after the rough ride that includes three individuals of the three religions of the orient, it signals a rebirth of Orientalism. Rebirth signifies change for the better, and John Updike narrates it very well.

Conclusion

John Updike has depicted the juxtaposition that America is. The land of the free also has radicalized people who take objection to the culture and faith of other people, the infidels – the very people who have given zealots the liberty to practice Islam. Through Ahmad's inner conflict which is rooted in confusion and clouded by the wrong interpretation of Islam, *Terrorist* manoeuvres the murky waters of fanaticism. Updike deftly brings to the fore the cultural differences and the comparison of core beliefs of the eastern and the western world. The question of compatibility of an individual living a in a multicultural society and blinded by faith is addressed convincingly and forcefully. Through the protagonist, Updike creates an awareness about what any faith actually stands for. In the novel, orientalism is equated with Islam and the author painstakingly represents both sides of the faith. Ultimately, the protagonists reason and wisdom prevail over the indoctrination that he has received by not carrying out the terrorist attack. That moment signifies the rebirth of Orientalism in the novel. The innate values of Orientalism – love and compassion – are displayed in one single act. John Updike has presented the crafty and manoeuvring ploys of the religious preachers of Islam to create mayhem in society through their twisted interpretation of Islam. However, he underlines the universal truth that truth prevails over falsehood and that is the essence of Orientalism.

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