



Spotlighting a Terrorist: A Review of Racial Profiling in Terrorist by John Updike

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ABSTRACT

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Besides affecting the global socio-political situation, the 9/11 attacks gave rise to newer forms of literary productions with distinct post-9/11 traits. Since most of the post-9/11 literary and political debates have focused on the fight between terror groups presumably based in the Muslim world and the secular west led by the United States of America, the practices of profiling, stereotyping, and counter-stereotyping have been common. We have explored racial profiling and stereotyping in Terrorists by John Updike to understand the novel's contribution to post-9/11 political propaganda. We provide textual analysis of Terrorists by drawing evidence of profiling along racial, religious, political, cultural, and geographical lines. We conclude that various forms of propaganda including polemical fiction have eroded the inter-communal harmony in the post-9/11 American society. Finally, we recommend measures against the menace of terrorism that may be effective without compromising the civil liberties of citizens.

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1. Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States turned the course of history all over the world. The tragedy triggered a global conflict between the western world led by the United States of America and the religiously inspired terror network of Al Qaeda. This global conflict gave rise to politically oriented media, literary, and cultural productions in which the Muslims as faith group were negatively targeted. Muslim immigrant communities in the west, specifically in the US became the focus of a smearing campaign even though they have been politically weak and economically struggling (Borzorgmehr, 2015). Despite facing the post-9/11 governmental suppression, and street hatred, Muslims have not succeeded in solidifying any communal grouping and internal bonding (Love, 2009).

This study explores a distinctly representative post-9/11 novel to uncover the political or ideological viewpoint projected by the writer. Since the literature offers critical insights into the socio-political circumstances of its time, we have tried to explore how John Updike has reflected the phenomena of terrorism, interracial and interfaith relations, and most importantly how the novel contributed to the propaganda against Muslims and influenced post-9/11 policies on immigration or security.

Muslim presence in the US dates to times of slavery and successive US governments have been changing their policies on immigration. Haddad and Qurqmaz (2000) published a detailed bibliography on scholarship about Muslim presence in the Western world and captured the policy dilemma of the West in deciding whether to uphold the values of multiculturalism and freedom of religion or treat the immigrant Muslims as unwanted aliens.

Muslims continue to wonder whether Western democracies are liberal enough to include Islamic input into the national consensus. Will Western concepts of pluralism and/or multiculturalism be flexible enough to provide for Islamic input into the shaping of the future of Western society? Or will Muslims continue to be the alien 'other'? (Haddad & Qurqmaz, 2000).

The persistent stereotypical portrayal of the Muslims in the American media and popular fiction have had the intended impact on American public. Ali (2017) noted that most Americans think of the war on terror "less in terms of Muslim deaths and suffering overseas than its impact on American soldiers killed or physically, mentally, or morally injured, and the weight of these deaths and injuries on military spouses and families (Ali, 2017)." According to Sides and Gross (2013), anti-Muslim stereotyping in news media and books was used by the US government as a strategy to build public support for the war against terrorism. Looking into the collective self-analysis of some post-9/11 writers and the role of literature in modern society, Looney (2010) said that "the confluence of terrorism and literature is, in and of itself, a fruitful position from which to contemplate issues surrounding the role of literature in modern society (p. 200)."

2. Theoretical Framework

The hypothetical framework of this paper is based on the question of whether the selected piece of the post 9/11 fiction objectively depicts the political and social reality of the time or misrepresents it by stereotypically portraying certain geographic identities, religions, languages, communal groups, and individuals. This paper investigates the question of whether John Updike has presented the post-9/11 reality objectively. We embark on by hypothesizing that the *Terrorist* by John Updike projects stereotypical image of Muslims and we will prove or disprove this hypothesis based on textual evidence of racial, geographical, linguistic, or religious stereotyping. The novel that has been examined is very befitting for this study because it deals with multiculturalism, politics of radicalization, extremism, and intolerance demonstrated by the religious right. Besides being a significant contribution to our understanding of the phenomena of terrorism, extremism, and radicalization, this study is also an important critique of the post-9/11 anti-terrorism policy of the West.

The terms like stereotyping, representation, xenophobia, cultural integration and assimilation, ethnicity, pluralism, and multi-culturalism form the core of post 9/11 fiction in general. Stereotyping is a generalization, mostly incorrect, oversimplified or grossly exaggerated and essentially has some offensive attributes to it. The question of defining stereotypes is somewhat messy, but a considerably comprehensive definition is given by Stangor (2016) as, stereotypes represent the traits that we view as characteristic of social groups, or of individual members of those groups, and particularly those that differentiate groups from each other. In short, they are the traits that come to mind quickly when we think about the groups (Stangor, 2016)

By this definition, the practice of making over-generalizations in literary fiction and media have not necessarily created stereotypes per se, but they have reinforced the long-held stereotypes about Muslims by linking terrorism, militancy, and radicalization with Muslims community or Islam as a religion.

The type of stereotyping that this paper deals with is racial stereotyping in post-9/11 US society. The inter-communal rift and the lack of social order in American society is the result of racial and religious stereotyping (Sides & Gross, 2013). The present study does not focus on all forms of stereotyping in *Terrorist* because this novel can be studied in unmanageably broad perspectives. For example, the high frequency of mentioning the complexion of some of the characters of the novel is plain racialization. Secondly, too many quotations from the Holy Quran make the novel look more like a work of theology rather than a fiction. Thirdly, the selection of Quranic excerpts is very intriguing, as the Quranic quotes in the novel are far removed from their original context. Finally, the settings of the novel project Muslim immigrants as security threat for the US. Stereotyping, according to (Stangor, 2016), is used to describe or distinguish a religious, ethnic, geographic, linguistic, or political group to demonize it. Muslim bashing in all these forms have been perfectly achieved in *Terrorist* and Updike makes no effort to hide his hatred for Muslim immigrants in rallying the American right to purge the American society of this community.

Portrayal of the Muslims as a communal group is the central concern of this paper; and the rationale for exploring post-9/11 fiction. According to Dictionary.com, "(Misrepresentation, n.d.), distort, falsify, belie share the sense of presenting information in a way that does not

accord with the truth.”(Pintak, 2006) says that snubbing Muslims exclusively in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 was an example of strategic (mis)representation of Muslims by means of distortion of the ground reality. The continuous (mis)representation of Muslim communities by the media and the US government made them appear the obvious villains of terrorism because they had not accepted and adopted the American way of life. This anti-Muslim rhetoric created the reality of Muslims as ‘others’ by strategically creating a connection between what was attacked in 9/11 (American values and capitalist system) and who was ideologically and historically against it. Thus, the responsibility of 9/11 was heaped on Muslim community.

2. Literature Review

The massive wave of anti-Muslim rhetoric after 9/11 led to a xenophobic backlash against Muslims across the West and specifically in the US. Xenophobia (n.d.) according to online Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “extreme dislike or fear of foreigners, their customs, their religions etc.”, and this fear and dislike of foreigners is a psychological state of mind (Reynolds, Falger, & Vine, 1987). Xenophobia involves mistrust and hatred of foreigners (De Master & Le Roy, 2000), and has its roots in ethnicity (Yakushko, 2009). It should be treated as a practice instead of an ideological notion because it inherently involves violence (Kollapan, 1999). Islamophobia refers to the general view of unacceptability of Muslims in non-Muslim societies. Ghazali (2008) defined Islamophobia as “alienation, discrimination, harassment and violence rooted in misinformed and stereotyped representations of Islam and its adherents (p. 5).” The following quote from (Bleich, 2012) offers a more apt understanding of Islamophobia.

Islamophobia can best be understood as indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims. (It) covers instances where negative assessments are applied to all or most Muslims or aspects of Islam viewed in this way, Islamophobia is analogous to terms like racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism. Aversion, jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anxiety, rejection, contempt, fear, disgust, anger, and hostility give a sense of the range of negative attitudes and emotions that may constitute Islamophobia. ... the target may be the religious doctrine or the people who follow it (Bleich, 2012).

Post-9/11 era witnessed unprecedented levels of anti-Muslim sentiments in the American public. Commenting on the rising wave of anti-Muslim rhetoric in the US, (Ghazali, 2008) noted that the Americans’ attitudes regarding the Muslim community and Islamic faith are the result of political statements of military and civil leaders and negative media coverage of Muslims and Islam. In the novel *Terrorist*, there are very elaborate instances of xenophobic hatred against the Muslim immigrants. The author’s underlying endorsement of such zealotry is worrying because such levels of intolerance by an otherwise intellectual literary figure does not augur well for inter-communal harmony.

The assertiveness of the Western right has increased and its demands of culturally integrating the immigrant communities are becoming louder, and in some cases violent. Updike frequently portrays Ahmad and his religious teacher to stand out as the *odd-man-out* of the society. Colgan (2009) makes a very interesting observation that Updike’s *Terrorist* redefines post-9/11 America through the author’s imagination. According to Updike, the multicultural status of American society as false and deceiving because immigrants pose as if they are culturally assimilated into the American mainstream, but they are not.

Racial profiling, in a broader sense, is ‘use’ of religion, race, national origin, or ethnicity by government agencies as a tool for deciding as to who should be investigated for possible links to ordinary crimes or terrorism. The profiling of the Muslims and Arabs in the US officially began when Attorney General Ashcroft announced in November 2001 that in connection with the 9/11 investigations, the government would target men from Middle East and South Asia (Swiney, 2006), even if they are not suspected of any criminal activity. Regarding the governmental policy of dealing with immigrants suspected of any specific crime, it has been noted that, “while governmental targeting usually singles out specific groups ... through legislative initiatives and policies, members of the host society are more likely to engage in indiscriminate stereotyping and scapegoating (Borzorgmehr, 2015).” This brings to light the bitter fact that after 9/11, the race, ethnicity, and religion became the basis for suspecting an individual’s association with terrorism. The US government had claimed that its anti-terrorism campaign was not aimed at profiling any specific communal group or individuals, but the situation on the ground made mockery of this claim. While refuting the government’s claim of

fairness, (Ghazali, 2008) noted, "Singling out Muslims and Arabs for questioning and detention and selective application of the immigration laws to the nationals of Arab and Muslim countries, were practices that spoke louder than words (p. 63)."

Updike makes use of the profiling strategy in *Terrorist* by means of detailed elaborations of personal idiosyncrasies like dressing, and other attributes of appearance to create clear, vivid, and generalizable profiles of those characters. The profiling in the novel is so vivid that it feels like real-life enactment of the suspicion-riddled post-9/11 security atmosphere of American society. Although Muslims in America have historically not been well organized as a community (Love, 2009), the post-9/11 anti-Muslim initiatives of the government and massive hatred by the xenophobes of the host society created a sense of bonding among Arab Muslims and they rallied support to keep themselves united by promoting a pan-ethnic group identity for their community (Gold, 2015).

Besides the governmental backlash, stereotyping and racial profiling, the smear campaign of Muslim vilification also accused Muslims of extremism. Extremism is a disposition or tendency to resort to the most dangerous option as a first choice or attempting to get the most harmful result for the opponent. As Ebata (2018) noted that the label extremism has the potential of being used for discrediting one's opponents, these days the extremist Muslim versus moderate Muslim binary is used to draw a distinction between the Muslims who do not resist the American neo-colonial occupation of many Muslim countries or Israeli occupation of Arab lands and those who do. Defining religious extremism Liebman (1983) said, "there is an increase in strength and/or influence of groups as religiously extreme (p. 76)". This is not very satisfactory definition because it does not address the problem for which the term 'extremism' is being discussed in the first place. We prefer to limit our discussion to the moderate vs extremist binary because that is the basis of government policies and the public attitudes against Muslims. In that context, Guiora (2013) said that the government can be prevented from pursuing security policies that have the potential to undercut the civil liberties of citizens if religious extremism is defined and a clear line of demarcation is drawn to distinguish religious extremism from freedom of religion.

The characters of *Terrorist* like Ahmad Mulloy Ashmawy and his religious teacher Shaikh Rashid manifest hardcore extremism in their views and actions. The extremism Updike has associated with those characters reinforces the stereotypes generally associated with practicing Muslim youth and Muslim clergy.

The reactions in the Muslim world to the western high-handedness took many forms and manifestations, and the propaganda machinery of the west branded it terrorism. Terrorism as a "term has evolved from its initial use to imply that non-state actors, individuals or organizations may be the main perpetrators of terrorism" (Jackson & Towle, 2006). This rather broad definition characterizes any government that persecutes its own people as a terrorist government. Looney (2010) is of the view that all the authors who have written on the subjects like terrorism, art, or literature, have essentially addressed a perceived connection between the two in the realm of aesthetics. Thus, the modern terrorism is not merely a political phenomenon but a broader practice which incorporates aspects of media, aesthetics, performing arts, and symbolism.

4. Textual Analysis

Terrorist was written in the context of September 11 attacks and the novel makes specific references to those tragic events. It deals with issues such as identity, ethnicity, color/racialism, hybridity, multiculturalism, acculturation, citizenship, social inequality, and cultural assimilation etc.

The literary notion of representation directly applies to this study in the sense that the characters of Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy and Sheikh Rashid 'stand in' for the radical ideology and violent tendencies which the author has sought to associate with the faith of these character. Such an association seems to have been constructed through the way the action moves forward in the plot. The monologues of Ahmad wherein he disdains the infidel way of life, show how an intriguing skepticism of the society has been made an inherent part of his very persona. With a hybrid parentage shared between Middle East (Egyptian father) and Europe

(Irish mother), Ahmad is living on another continent North America. It is noteworthy that Ahmad's foreign parentage and religious identity in the novel have a well-thought-out political significance of fitting the image of extremist. One wonders how the character and associated political and ideological concepts would be left in total disarray if we were to assume an alternative identity for this character as a natural born white Caucasian citizen of Christian faith. Blessington (2008) has noted some precise analogies between the terrorist character of *Terrorist* and the typical terrorists produced by the excessive influence of religion and parental neglect which normally follows the failure of international and interfaith marriages. All that is exactly what Updike has represented in *Terrorist*.

Updike has played the politics of linguistic superiority by not hiding his condemnation of the Arabic language. He shows his hatred for the Arabic language and its speakers, by making the character of Secretary as his mouth piece, "There's something weird about the language - it makes them feeble-minded, somehow" (p. 259). Updike has projected the idea that the Arabic language is responsible for the plight of Arab communities because their language "makes them feeble-minded". He views the language as a factor dividing the host American society from its Muslim immigrants, and thus reinforces the demand for cultural and linguistic integration. Assimilation and integration are code words to demand of Arabs a complete divorce from their ancestral language and culture.

Updike sought to achieve his objective of associating terrorism with Islamic faith by stereotypically portraying mosque and Quran. This aspect merits a great deal of attention that Updike has portrayed the prominent symbols of Islamic faith such as mosque and the Quran in a way they appear as the reason of all the flaws of Ahmad's personality. All the radical ideas of Ahmad are shown to have developed out of his association with the mosque. The night before his planned suicide attack, Ahmad spends the entire time with the Quran, performs obligatory prayers. By showing Ahmad reading Quran and performing prayers during the night before his planned act of violence, Updike convinces readers that Muslim terrorists get the last-minute inspiration for their heinous acts from their religion. This very setting of the plot reinforces the underlying message that Islamic faith does indeed inspire violence. The Quranic verses quoted in the text of the novel set the discourse link the planned terror attack with the injunctions of the Islamic faith.

There is a lot of racism in the writings of John Updike and *Terrorist* is not an exception. It puts an excessive focus on complexion of characters by highlighting various shades of colors. Updike's treatment of ethnicity and racialism is evident from the fact that he assigns the black complexion to the Muslim characters of the novel and they have been presented as a second-class minority whose members have nefarious intentions of inflicting suffering and harm to their host society. When Ahmad asks the imam whether God wouldn't show mercy and convert nonbelievers to Islam instead of inflicting terror, Shaikh Rashid, the imam, replies,

The cockroaches that slither out from the baseboard and from beneath the sink - do you pity them. The flies that buzz around the food on the table, walking on it with the dirty feet that have just danced on feces and carrion - do you pity them? (p. 76).

That is the association that Updike has created between hatred and the representatives of Islamic faith, like the imam. The words like cockroaches and flies spoken by a Muslim clergyman in describing the whole American nation makes a very strong point to the conclusion that this faith and its followers are not fit for living in America. The content of the novel in general singles out the Muslim Arab community of the U.S. as a target of reinforcing the xenophobic and repulsive tendencies. In fact, the writer has painted such a grim picture of the interfaith and inter-communal relations of America that it seems irreparable and necessitates a complete removal of Arab Muslims to restore the social order. The solution to which the text of the novel leads the reader is reminiscent of the approach of European colonizers towards the native Africans and described in *Heart of Darkness* as "exterminate all the brutes (Conrad, 1983)." The immigrants from the African continent and Middle East are not considered manageable anymore, so they must either be told to 'correct' themselves or leave.

One interesting point in the plot of *Terrorist* is that the imam of the mosque and other members of his 'terror racket' seem to have manipulated Ahmad by capitalizing on his emotional love for God. The depiction of the character of Ahmad in comparison with real-life

terror events is meant to associate this character with the outside reality. For instance, the writer implicitly draws parallels between his fictional character, Ahmad, and a 9/11 terrorist, Mohammad Atta, to verify that the two characters are alike,

[Ahmad] shaves his face, though he knows that debate rages over how God prefers to see men face to face. The Chehabs preferred him to shave, since bearded Muslims, even teenagers, alarmed the kafir customers. Mohammed Atta had shaved, and most of the eighteen other inspired martyrs. The anniversary of their feat was last Saturday, and the enemy will have relaxed his defenses. (p. 271)

The problem is not merely the appearances of individuals, but how the racialized stereotype of any Muslim conflates the religion with terrorism. Kamran (2012) resented this predisposition of Muslim susceptibility to acts of terrorism which he likened to the genetic make-up of Muslims. Kamran complains that American security agencies behave as though the Muslims have a terrorism gene that "can be triggered and thus result in the Muslim individual degenerating into a mindless terrorist bent on destroying the United States (Kamran, 2012)."

Updike has projected Muslims in such a way that evil and villainy appear to be synonymous to Arabs or Muslims. Throughout his novel, Updike heavily relies on stereotypes; his portrayal of Ahmad and other Arab characters in general is stereotypical and lacks any sound logic or psychological depth. Owing to their Arab origins, Ahmad and the Yemeni Shaikh Rashid have been depicted as brutes, primitive, unintelligent, murderers and suicide bombers. Greenberg and Kosloff (2008) noted that, "Unfortunately, 'evil' is most often identified in the form of another group e.g., a different culture or minority (p. 1887)." In the same fashion Updike uses every opportunity to express his patriotic love for America and he achieves that expression of patriotism by means of xenophobic hatred of Arabs and Muslims. Assuming the US a utopian society of tolerance, he completely ignores the hate crimes against immigrants, especially Muslims reported so often in the local and foreign media. For example, the character Shaikh Rashid's disdain for multiculturalism projects the idea that the Muslim cleric wants to impose his pure monolithic views on religion and culture.

No, Sheikh Rashid did not suggest that, sir. He feels that such a relativistic approach trivializes religion, implying that it doesn't much matter. You believe this, I believe that, we all get along - that's the American way. Right! And he doesn't like the American way. He hates it (p. 38).

The underlying message here is that the multiculturalism and tolerant co-existence is the American way, and Islam and Muslims are not compatible with that, so they must either abandon their faith or quit America.

The textual analysis of *Terrorist* brings forth some very interesting findings about the US popular culture, the issues of ethnic, religious, racial, and linguistic diversity and the perceived role of Islam as a threat to the secular polity of America. In the context of politico-ideological struggles narrated in the novel, the Muslim immigrant community stands as the odd-man-out in the American social fabric because they are supposedly unwilling to assimilate into the mainstream. Updike would want readers to believe that the Muslim minority's struggle for preserving its culture and language(s) has turned violent and resulted in suicide terrorists after 9/11. By exploring all these issues, we argue that Updike has used his authorial control for stereotyping and misrepresentation in portrayal of the members of US Muslim immigrant community by branding them as either terrorists or sponsors and facilitators of terrorism. To achieve this purpose, Updike has depicted the Muslim characters in *Terrorist*, as those having stubbornly radical religious ideology, which fuels inherent tendencies towards committing indiscriminate violence against members of other faith groups. The ultimate point of such (mis)representation is to project the idea that the injunctions of Islamic faith inspire radical ideology and violence.

The textual analysis of *Terrorist* shows that all the three research questions were proved in the affirmative leading to the conclusion that *John Updike* has indulged in racial profiling and stereotyping in portraying the textual evidence suggests that the writer of

Terrorist has stereotyped the Muslim characters of the novel by setting the text in way that implies the following.

1. Muslims have a radical religious ideology characterized by hatred.
2. Muslims indulge in indiscriminate violence against non-Muslims.
3. Islam as a faith inspires radical ideologies that fuel violence.

The text of the novel affirms the first point through the stubborn and inflexible views to Ahmad and his religious teacher Shaikh Rashid on the status of non-Muslims in general. The two Muslim characters of the novel exhibit excessive hatred towards the members of other faiths by branding them as infidels. While preparing Ahmad for the terrorist act, Shaikh Rashid, the Muslim imam, and religious teacher, even likens the non-Muslim Americans to 'cockroaches' and 'flies' deserving no pity. By assigning such views to the Muslim imam, Updike has associated the radicalization, hatred, and violence to Muslims in general.

The supposition about Muslims indulging in violence is also proved by the fact that all the Muslim characters in the novel contribute to violence in various forms and in varying degrees. Ahmad goes for a suicidal mission, and his teacher, the imam Shaikh Rashid had radicalized him (Ahmad) from a bright promising college student to a potential terrorist. Chehabs and their Arab technicians do the engineering work for providing explosive materials and finally provide Ahmad, the would-be terrorist, with technical expertise of detonating the explosives in a terror mission.

Finally, the Islamic faith has been portrayed as the source of radical ideologies by showing Shaikh Rashid, the Muslim imam, succeed in convincing young Ahmad to perpetrate terrorist acts through the teachings of Holy Quran. According to the text of the novel, the imam exploits the young boy's love for God and propels the violent ideology by depicting the American society as the enemies of God. Updike has created and presented the character of Shaikh Rashid to inculcate the hateful and violent ideologies in the mind of the young Muslim student Ahmad. The imam achieves that by specially focusing on the Quranic verses pertaining to the warnings for unbelievers and the promised rewards for the good practicing believers. This way, Updike successfully builds the idea that Islam as a faith, is a vehicle of violence and hatred.

5. Conclusion

We can conclude by saying that post-9/11 era has a special significance in the contemporary history, and it has deeply affected the global political landscape and has caused realignment of political relations among sovereign states internationally. The broader message given through racial profiling, stereotypical media and polemical literary productions is that Muslim immigrants pose a security threat to the US, so they should either be compelled to completely surrender their language, culture, and faith (demand for greater integration and assimilation) or be deported back to their native countries. Amid the unfolding scenario of competing cultural and religious struggles in the post-9/11 world, the dream of multicultural pluralism is dying, and ethnic tensions are on the rise. For making the peaceful coexistence of majority and minority communities in the countries of diverse populations possible, conflict-mongers and hawks of the secular west and those in the Muslim world, should be reined simultaneously.

6. Policy Recommendations

This paper has attempted to highlight some major fault lines in Islam's relations with the western world in general, and the United States in specific. Following action plan is recommended for improvement in the situation nationally or internationally.

Firstly, the international disputes like the question of Palestinian statehood, which are the major cause of creating hostility along religious lines, should be resolved so that the wave of Anti-Americanism in the Muslim world may be stemmed.

Secondly, it should be realized that most of these problems have been caused by an atmosphere of mistrust among various communal groups in Western societies, therefore, an interfaith dialogue should be promoted to bridge the trust-deficit as early as possible.

Thirdly, people should be educated about the strengths of diverse society so that they turn up to celebrate the presence of foreign immigrants amidst themselves, instead of repelling them as outsiders and others.

Lastly, Muslim governments in the Middle East and in other regions of the world should urge their citizens living in the United States to respect the cultural norms of their host society so that these immigrants have better prospects of social acceptability and thus be able to reap the fruits of peace and harmony.

We hope that such measures, if implemented, can improve not only the inter-community relations in the United States but also the latter's diplomatic ties with Muslim countries.

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