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Islam and Modernity: A Study of John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006)

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Abstract

The images of Muslims in media, literature and politics have been mostly black and white portrayals of a people alien to modernity, technology, civilization and progress. Since the end of the Cold War and the onset of deadly terrorist attacks in different areas of the world, especially in the United States, these representations show a palpable difference: Muslims are predominantly represented not only as anti-modern barbarians, but also as terrorists. The present paper examines John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) as one of many American novels which, in line with the dominant political discourse, has focused on representing Muslims as 'the others' and Islam as a totalitarian and retrogressive religion which orders its adherents to use violence against unbelievers. The writers discuss Updike's attempt at introducing Islam as intolerant of Western modernity and democracy (the main inspiration for the Arab-Muslim protagonist of the novel intends to carry out a terrorist attack). The aim is to show how Updike more or less subscribes to and empowers Orientalist conceptions of Islam.

Keywords: Islam, modernity, Orientalism, terrorism, John Updike

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1. Introduction

This paper offers a reading of the representation of the purported animosity between Islam and modernity in John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), as one of American novels which has been written on Islam in the wake of terrorist attacks ascribed to Islamic fundamentalists. The present writers' main focus would be on pointing out the fact that the stereotypical images through which the Muslim characters of this novel (as well as the characters of other novels that deal with Islam) are represented, are rooted in what Edward Said has called Orientalism, a discourse which produces 'knowledge' about the Orient in order to legitimize the West's power over the Orient.

In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said believes that "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'" (Said, 1978, p. 2). The dualism on which Orientalism is based offers a difference between 'the self' and 'the others' in order to justify some patterns of exploitation and domination. This difference is a dramatic one, a "difference by nature", as Samiei puts it, according to which a group of people are allowed to treat another group as inferior and less human (2009, p. 7). These distinctions, which have changed into stereotypical images of Orientals generally and Muslims particularly, not only legitimize the way 'the others' are subjected to Western control and domination, but also, as Bhabha notes, help the process of identity-creation in that they "construe not only those who are stereotyped, but also the stereotyper himself--in opposition to the stereotyped." They, Bhabha continues, "function to construe and confirm the stereotyper's identity" (Bertens, 2001, p. 208). Thus, many writers "have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny, and so on" in order to strengthen their superiority by representing the West as rational, civilized, normal, modern, and democrat in contrast to the irrational, uncivilized, odd, backward, and despotic Orient (Said, 1978, p. 3).

2. Discussion

Drawing on Foucault's argument about the relation between power and knowledge, Said points out that the "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (1978, p. 5). He believes that the representations of the Orient are merely stereotypes rather than 'representations' of the real Orient. Such attempts at stereotyping, Said believes, definitely serve the Orientalist discourse in producing structured patterns of imaginary enemies in order to contribute to the justification of colonial projects of the West in the East. Said challenges the Orientalist discourse and shows that "what was thought to be a genuine branch of knowledge has been in many ways some grand narratives fabricated in favor of Western political dominance" (Samiei, 2009, p. 21).

In order to support and reinforce Western political, economic and cultural power and control over the Muslims, Orientalism produced a kind of 'knowledge' about Islam as the religion of the West's menacing 'others'. This Islam was anything that the West was not. It was portrayed as an absolutist religion which, in its very nature, was incompatible with modernity, democracy, human rights, which was intolerant towards Western values and people. It was the same Islam which is known as 'political Islam' among those who claim to be the harbingers of the so-called war against terror. It was the Islam which, as Said notices, was shaped to be the "new empire of evil" (1978, p. 346), which was directly associated with terrorism, violence and tyranny, the Islam whose disciples were portrayed as murderers, as a new threat that "will take over the world" (Ibid.p. 287).

Among such clichés and misrepresentations of Islam, is its portrait as a backward religion. Since the emergence of modernity in the West and the attempts at replacing the traditional norms of the Eastern societies with the values of modernity, portrayals of Muslims as resistant "to change, to mutual comprehension between East and West, to the development of men and women out of old-fashioned narratives, primitive classical institutions and into modernity" have proliferated in

Western media and culture (Said, 1978: 263). The assumption, in Orientalist discourse, has always been that “Islam—as a culture and not only a religious creed—was primitive, underdeveloped, retrograde, at best stuck in the memory hole of a medieval splendor out of which it could not disentangle itself without a radical transformation; and this could only be based on Western, rational, progressive values” (Milton-Edward, 2005, p. 4). But later, different encounters of Muslims with this radical transformation called modernity and especially their resistance to be Westernized, marked Islam as “something not of this modern time”, but “understood as backward and anachronistic” (Ibid, pp. 66-7).

Modernity, as the greatest phenomenon of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marked a shift from religious concerns to the ‘rational’ ones of this world. A lot has been written on how the emphasis on reason, rationalism and individualism or in short the so-called humanistic values led to, paradoxically, dehumanization, to violence, racism, and genocide--the darker side of modernity. Imperialism, as one of the manifestations of this darker side, “saw the history as a linear progress towards Western capitalism and liberal secularism, concluding with the transformation of the world into a single, global, western civilization” (Inayatullah and Boxwell, 2003, p. 122). It posited the Western civilization as the yardstick by which non-Westerners were measured. “It considered what was not modern to be inferior and therefore unworthy of respect, dignity and survival” (Ibid). Therefore, imperialism, directly influenced by modernity, oppressed and marginalized non-Western cultures, civilizations and voices and placed the modern Western culture as the norm, as the only accepted truth whose main cornerstone was secularism.

Although imperialists attempted at internalizing modernity’s norms in the Orient, Westerners believe that what has been transferred to the lands of ‘the others’ through European expansion was what Anthony Giddens has called ‘the institutional dimension of modernity’. Bassam Tibi in his book, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, is concerned with two aspects of modernity: the ‘institutional’ and ‘cultural’. He argues that

the institutional modernity is related to “science, technology, and the achievements (that is, the modern institutions and instruments) resulting from them while, the cultural modernity, as Habermas describes, is concerned with Western norms and values which caused such instruments” (1998, p. 65). Cultural modernity is based on the idea of subjectivity and individualism which portrays man free to discover his own land and nature in order to place it at the service of human beings. This view is also based on the rational worldview which emphasizes the centrality of man and his capacity to be a creator. Tibi notes that although the West intended to transmit both of these aspects to the occupied lands, non-Westerners or as he generally calls them, fundamentalists, dismissed the cultural modernity while embracing the institutional one (Ibid, p. 66). He calls this kind of modernity “Islamic dream of semi-modernity” which means the disentanglement of the instruments of modernity from the thought paradigm which led to the creation of such instruments (Ibid, p. 74).

Pace this bipolar conception of encounters with modernity among Muslims, favored in the West, it is possible to identify three main responses to modernity. The first one, as Khir (2007) notes, is the assimilative trend, generally called Islamic modernism or liberal Islam, which identifies itself uncritically with both cultural and institutional modernity as developed in the West and aims to reinterpret Islam in the light of modern culture and modes of thinking. The dismissive trend, that is, fundamentalism, opposes the infiltration of Western ideologies into Islam and advocates a strong preference to recourse to traditional pre-modern Islamic thought and interpretations. The adherents of this approach, it is claimed, accept the institutional modernity in order to equip themselves with the latest technology to overwhelm the West with its own equipment but refuse to internalize the cultural modernity. The third approach, which is that of those usually called the moderate or challenging group, adopts a critical stance to both the assimilative and dismissive groups (p. 264). It holds that neither Islam needs to be adapted to modernity nor modernity needs to be brought into line with Islam

because being a Muslim has no incompatibility with being a modern man. As such, although rejecting the rationalist confidence of Cultural modernity “in the capacity of science and technology to solve *all* of humanity's problems” (emphasis added), Muslims always agree with rationalism, scientism, individualism, human rights, democracy and the use of technology and modern inventions in order to live a better life (Groff, 2007, p. 113).

Overlooking the moderate group, the West usually denies the compatibility of Islam with modernity. Although a large number of Muslims believe in the possibility of coexistence of modernity and Islam in a society, Westerners usually disregard this fact and instead focus on the members of the second group, who are generally referred to as ‘Islamists’, extremists or Wahhabists, known for their literal interpretations of Islam and the Qur’an. Since the colonial encounters and the arrival of modernity in the Orient, Wahhabists, or as the West usually calls them, fundamentalists, have usually been imaged as representing the whole of Muslim community. Therefore, the dominant image in Western media, politics and literature has been the enmity between Islam and modernity, the deep gap between a religion which represented tradition and a phenomenon which in its very Western form dictated secularism. Emphasizing such a gap, the West assumed a “liberal/secular worldview in which only those values and beliefs that fit the grand narrative of Western liberalism were deemed acceptable”, whereas others that fall outside it were assumed to imply lack of commitment to democracy, human rights and modernity (Mishra, 2008, p. 172). Thus, Western media and press portrayed a secularized and Westernized Islam as the moderate and democratic Islam and emphasized the claim that there is a “conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society” (Ibid, p. 173). In line with this, any Muslim who refuses to leave his religious background and traditions behind in order to embrace modernity is labeled anti-modern and instead, anyone who accepts modernity wholesale without questioning its norms is perceived to be modern, liberal and democratic.

2.1 Islam's enmity with modernity in *Terrorist*

Today, what we witness is a kind of cultural imperialism which walks along with what was previously called direct or physical imperialism. As Said contends in his *Culture and Imperialism*, "in our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; Imperialism lingers where it has always been, in a kind of cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices" (1993, p. 9). As such, Said accuses culture generally and literature particularly of serving the dominant political discourses of the time. He believes that the novel, as an influential means of dictating and naturalizing specific values, and imperialism, as a Western modern product, "fortified each other to such a degree that they are unthinkable without each other and it is impossible to read one without in some way dealing with the other" (Ibid, p. 12). Different writers, such as travel writers, journalists, poets and novelists have portrayed the Orientals as, the mysterious, exotic and generally the inferior 'others' of the West so as to fashion and sustain, in line with the political discourses of their time, a sense of Western superiority and normality for their readers.

Since the end of the Cold War, Western superiority has been perceived in opposition to its new enemy, to Islam imaged as an intolerant and one-dimensional faith whose inseparable ties to the past were considered to be a threat to the security of the world. Influenced by Orientalist and the recent Neo-Orientalist representations of Muslims in politics, media and press, many novelists have touched upon the issue of 'Islamic fundamentalism' as a direct product of the purportedly anti-modern nature of Islam. As such, some have described the so-called enmity between Islam and modernity from the Westerners' point of view and some have allegedly penetrated into the Muslim terrorists' minds in order to depict such a contrast. Among the novels written on Islam with special focus on terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, John Updike's *Terrorist* whose Muslim characters' biased comments on modern creations and concepts are in line with dominant discourses of Neo-Orientalism is outstanding. The novelist's main objective in this novel is

to represent Islam as backward in nature. Here, Updike, though never regarded as an Orientalist, reveals to be deeply influenced by Neo-Orientalist representations of Islam. To him Islam is a one-dimensional, fanatic religion, as he asserts in one of his interviews: “Islam doesn’t have as many shades of gray as the Christian or the Judaic faith does. It’s fairly absolutist, as you know, and you’re either in or not” (qtd. in Deyab, 2009, p. 6). This is exactly what happens in *Terrorist*. Ahmad, the fanatic Muslim protagonist, decides to kill the people whom he calls infidels, the people whose main fault is living the American way of life.

Right from the beginning of the novel, Ahmad turns out to be ‘the other’ Updike attempts to describe. The clash between his God and “these Devils” (Westerners) who seek to take away his God (Updike, 2006, p. 3) is dramatized in the following excerpt in which the narrator, reporting from Ahmad’s consciousness, depicts the carnal and sexually-obsessed atmosphere of the high school:

All day long, at Central High School, girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair. Their bare bellies, adorned with shining navel studs and low-down purple tattoos, asks, *What else is there to see?* Boys strut and saunter along and look dead-eyed, indicating with their edgy killer gestures and careless scornful laughs that this world is all there is—a noisy vanished hall lined with metal lockers and having at its end a blank wall desecrated by graffiti and roller-painted over so often it feels to be coming closer by millimeters (3).

In this excerpt, a distinction is to be made between ‘the narrative voice’ of the novel and ‘the focalizer’, here, Ahmad. Modernists, in order to achieve directness, put emphasis on excluding the traditional narrator. Hence, they drew on a form of narrative which Franz K. Stanzel calls a “figurative narrative”, that is, “a third-person narrative in which the storyworld is seen through the eyes of a character” (Jahn, 2007, p. 95). Such perceiving characters were called “centers”, “mirrors” or

“reflectors” in Henry James’s terminology and “focal characters” in Genette’s (Ibid, p. 95). Thus, dispensed with the comments and interventions of the traditional narrator, the modern text “appears to be determined by the filtering and coloring devices of the reflector’s mind, while the reader, seeing the storyworld through the reflector’s eyes, becomes a witness rather than the narrator’s communicative addressee” (Ibid, p. 96). This technique of narration is employed in *Terrorist*. Updike, as a modern novelist, makes use of what Genette calls “variable focalization” (Ibid, p. 98), in which the story is told through the eyes of several focal characters. Furthermore, Updike, in a Neo-Orientalist gesture, takes advantage of this form of narration and identifies Ahmad as ‘the other’ in contrast to the narrative voice as ‘the us’. Here, the narrator, reporting from Ahmad’s mind, not only narrates what he (Ahmad) sees but also penetrates into his very depths of mind in order to image him as a teen fundamentally different from his peers. Instead of getting pleasure, natural for a teen, from such an erotic atmosphere and relishing the thought of being part of it, Ahmad detaches himself, as a Muslim, from those who are despised, in his view, as the Westerners. As such, the narrative voice, ironically, distances himself from the focalizer in order to remind the readers that this is the way the Muslims see us, this is what we are condemned for and punished for. Also, this is the dogmatic Muslim mentality which denies the body, the *joie de vivre*.

Elsewhere, the depictions reflecting its focal character’s mind, Ahmad, take a more radical form and cajole the reader into believing his ‘otherness’ and taking side against him:

The teachers, weak Christians and nonobservant Jews, make a show of teaching virtue and righteous self-restraint, but their shifty eyes and hollow voices betray their lack of belief. They are paid to say these things, They lack true faith; they are not on the straight path; they are unclean (p. 4).

It is here that the first marked contrasts between Ahmad, as a “deeply religious personality” (qtd in Deyab, 2009, p. 15) and the “weak and nonobservant Jews”, as the representatives of the West, are

verbalized. Here, Ahmad, detaching himself completely from the West and its modern values, condemns the teachers as lacking true faith and labels them as “unclean”. These vituperations continue in the next descriptions concerned with the West’s absolute belief in scientism, rationalism and materialism:

They are paid to instill virtue and democratic values by the state government down in Trenton, and that Satanic government farther down, in Washington, but the values they believe in are Godless: biology and chemistry and physics. On the facts and formulas of these their false voices firmly rest, ringing out into the classroom. They say they all come out of merciless blind atoms, which cause the cold weight of iron, the transparency of glass, the stillness of clay, the agitation of flesh. Electrons pour through copper threads and computer gates and the air itself when stirred to lightning by the interaction of water droplets. Only what we can measure and deduce from measurement is true. The rest is the passing dream that we call our selves (Updike, 2006, p. 4).

Here, he attacks what he calls “Godless” values, those which are the basic foundations of the Western modernity. He feels his faith is threatened by the hedonistic, materialistic world around him, the world that has no connection with his religious values. It is this sense of threat that ensures the reader of Ahmad’s incapability of making sense of his life in the American society, of his disdain for the Western culture and of his possible danger for the Western political and cultural systems and people.

Laying his emphasis on the sense of insecurity and ambivalence that Ahmad feels as the result of his unsuccessful search for the compatibility between his “pure Islam” and “impure pop culture” (Batchelor, 2009, p. 72), Updike prepares the ground for throwing into high relief the presupposed Neo-Orientalist binary oppositions in the novel. While, at the beginning of the novel, the narrator implies the binary opposition of

'the us'/ 'the other' via reflecting Ahmad's mind, later, he touches upon more binaries to aid the readers to internalize the previously-implied Muslims' 'otherness'. For instance, influenced by his Quran teacher, Shaikh Rashid, Ahmad refuses to enter the college, though he seems to be talented enough, and chooses to be a truck driver instead because "More education... he feared, might weaken his faith" (Updike, 2006, p. 216). Here, Updike, imaging Ahmad's sense of fear of being corrupted by the materialist, consumerist and colonialist nature of Western system of education, reiterates the old stereotypical binary opposition of the modern and educated West versus the backward and ignorant East. Shaikh Rashid, as an Islamic fundamentalist who seems to be influenced by the long tradition of extreme intolerance that flows through Wahhabism (Blanchard, 2007, p. 5), believes that the only useful education is the one which helps Muslims to overwhelm Westerners with their own technology. Shaikh Rashid's teachings and beliefs, reflecting Taliban's biased interpretations of Islam, are rooted in Wahhabi doctrine, the doctrine which not only distributes a "hate ideology" against the West (Ibid), but also is considered as the basic supporter of the terrorist organization that developed in 1990 into al-Qaeda (Martin, 2004, p. 828). According to him, "In today's world, the heroes of Islamic resistance to the Great Satan were former doctors and engineers, adepts in the use of such machines as computers and airplanes and roadside bombs" (p.142). The point the writer tries to drive home here is that Islam is inimical to modernity; the only real use it could have for the achievements of modernity is to use them against the West—the home to modernity. This, it has to be mentioned, is a motif the novel shares with some mainstream fiction produced recently by writers such as Don DeLillo, Ian McEwan and Martin Amis.

Elsewhere, through Ahmad and Jack's conversation over Ahmad's plan for his future, Updike hints at the matter of democracy in order to portray Islam as a religion whose fear of being marginalized and overlooked in a liberal society makes it despise and refute the liberal American way of living:

“Did the imam ever suggest”, ..., “that a bright boy like you, in a diverse and tolerant society like this one, needs to confront a variety of viewpoints?” “No,” Ahmad says with surprising abruptness, his soft lips bunching in a pout of defiance. “Shaikh 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.” ... “And you, Mr. Mulloy? You hate it?” The boy shyly casts his eyes down again. “I of course do not hate all Americans. But the American way is the way of infidels. It is headed for a terrible doom.” (p. 39)

The motif of Islam--the Wahhabist interpretation of Islam presented as ‘Islam’--as an intolerant religion, as instanced in the above excerpt is a central one in the novel and is highlighted in different ways. ‘Wahhabism’, ‘Salafiyya’ and ‘Unitarianism’ are the terms which are interchangeably used to refer to the “Islamic puritanical movements” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 1) that seek to purify Islam by “cleansing it of all innovations” (Martin, 2004, p. 727). Aimed at enforcing a literal reading of the Quran, they react against such matters as the introduction of radios, television, automobiles, etc. (Ibid, p. 728). As to the question of art, for instance, the novel generalizes the Wahhabists’ literal and extremist interpretations of Islam and the Quran to the whole Muslim community. For instance, because of the mere assumption that they are imitations of God’s creations, painting and photography are regarded as blasphemous acts in the Wahhabist persuasion, presented as Islam, of course. This belief is questioned by Ahmad’s mother, Teresa, a modern Western woman representing ‘the us’, who, as a matter of fact, is a painter:

“... all I saw was a beautiful world around me, for however briefly, and I wanted to make images of its beauty.” “In

Islam, that's called blasphemy, trying to usurp God's prerogative of creation." "Well, I know. That's why there aren't any statues or paintings in mosques. To me that seems unnecessarily bleak. God gave us eyes to see what, then?" (p. 240).

Even Ahmad has hidden the pictures of his Egyptian father whom he has cherished as an ideal hero because of his religion: "Just this year, Ahmad took the photographs in his room of his father and put them face-down in drawers. He announced it was blasphemy to duplicate the image of a person God had made—a kind of counterfeiting, he explained to me" (p. 88). This, also, is another proof Updike brings forth of Islam's animosity with modernity's emphasis on human beings as free agents to whose humanity creativity is essential.

The representation Updike offers of Islam as a one-dimensional, backward, despotic religion leaves no possibility for Ahmad to be an 'American Muslim'. The only choice that Updike presents as viable for Ahmad is to be either an American or a Muslim. To be both is not a real choice, we realize. The only thing that this religion wants him to do is submission: "it was not Ahmad's role to argue; it was his to learn, to submit to his own place in Islam's vast structure, visible and invisible" (p. 77). This portrait of Islam goes contrary to the most basic tenets of modernity, those described as cultural modernity's values: individualism, thinking, and freedom to choose. It never supposes any right for Ahmad as a human being to choose to be both a modern man and religious one. Thus, it is not Ahmad's role to choose, but to be chosen to take revenge upon the "infidels ... who think safety lies in accumulation of the things of the world... they are slaves to images, false ones of happiness and affluence" (p. 4).

Throughout the novel, Updike's Neo-Orientalist stance is sustained; Islam's essential, radical 'otherness' and ultimately its inferiority and menace are the latent and manifest assumptions. Beside the narrative techniques, Updike takes advantage of an epiphany, not only to celebrate

Ahmad's sense of freedom at the end of the novel, but also to end the novel with another binary: the superiority and power of the West over the East. While Ahmad, at the end of the novel, in hope of gaining paradise, heads to blow up the bomb in the tunnel, ironically, Jack Levy, a representative of the West, who himself seems to lead a purposeless life (becoming a savior saves him from this sense of futility!), saves New Jersey physically and Ahmad mentally by reminding him that the God he has been introduced to is nothing but a cruel God determined on destruction. The recognition of the new God, the God who wills life rather than death, gives Ahmad the opportunity to choose his way on his own, the chance as a fundamentalist Muslim he had never had. Thus, the novel celebrates individual freedom when Ahmad decides against carrying out the terrorist act at the end of the novel (Batchelor, 2009, p. 78). This ending, confirming the sustained stance of Updike throughout the novel, leaves the reader assured of the superiority of the secular, modern, democratic and rationalist West (here Jack) over the religious, extremist, backward, totalitarian and exotic East (here Ahmad and Shaikh Rashid).

3. Conclusion

Since the Enlightenment and beginning of Western imperialism, Islam has often been represented as a totalitarian religion tied to the past and out-of-date traditions that modernity, as a western product and paradigm of thought, tried to leave behind. Later, the demise of the Soviet Union and the onset of terrorist attacks fortified the negativity of this representation by identifying Islam as synonymous with terrorism and the "chief culprit of global ills" (Milton-Edward, 2005, p. 118). This image emphasized the anti-modern nature of Islam as the main reason for the hatred Muslims feel for Western culture, society and people.

The Orientalist and later, Neo-Orientalist assumptions through which Muslims have been represented in politics and media are also traceable in the mainstream fiction of the recent years across the Atlantic, especially in the wake of 9/11 attacks. John Updike's *Terrorist* figures

prominently among these, not just because it is virtually the last novel by one of the most prolific and distinguished writers of contemporary fiction but also because it is arguably one of the most blatantly propagandistic ones too. Considering Updike's stature as a writer this sounds uncannily strange--all the more proof to the uncanny power of Neo-Orientalism.

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