

Facets of Racial Profiling and Cultural Misrepresentation in John Updike's Novel *Terrorist*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper attempts to point out how the genesis of suicide terrorism has been, not least in the aftermath of 9/11, the subject of intensive historical and cultural inquiry. In *Terrorist*, Updike composes an interracial and therefore entirely different West. In other words, Updike, in a certain way, takes up the role of an educator. The novel also generates a stereotypical image of 'dangerous' and "violent" cultural and religious "Otherness". In particular, what follows will gesture toward some of the ways in which multiculturalism frequently acts in Updike's work as a lens through which he is able to examine America and its position in a wider global context. Rather than preoccupying himself with issues of cultural identity politics or exploring alternative models of assimilation, it will be argued that Updike's primary interest in multiculturalism is in its ability to offer him a perspective of critique through which to examine present-day America. The focus in this paper thus will be on clarifying to what extent Updike's depiction of the Arab American Ahmad, (an embodiment, as it were, of the melting pot), fully engages or does justice to the complexities of ethnic and cultural identity issues. I take an interest in these questions as an American Studies scholar who happens to be an Egyptian (the nationality of Ahmad's absconding father) and a Muslim. I seek, in this paper, to gauge the extent to which Updike cherishes the Orientalist undertow that sweeps so many Westerners out to sea when they attempt to represent the thinking of the middle-eastern or Arab American or simply Muslim "Other". A special emphasis in this paper will be also laid on the impact of the protagonist's religious inclinations on his feeling of alienation and disdain of the world around him. Also, the paper will explore to what extent Ahmad's faith helps in fermenting and cherishing his nihilist outlook. The paper also seeks to pinpoint the hidden threads of the Orientalist discourse in *Terrorist* and whether this discourse is an extension of other arguments related to the imagined intercultural clash or the "us" versus "them" and East-West dichotomies which dominated the scene in the wake of the tragic events of 9/11 and somewhat widened the existing gap between Islam and the West.

KEYWORDS: *Updike; Terrorist; America; Multiculturalism; Arabs; Islam; Jihad; September 11.*

Introduction

John Updike's *Terrorist* signals the attempt on the part of one of America's most well-known and prolific writers to take on Islam and terrorism in the wake of 9/11. Far from offering a cohesive representation of ethnic and racially categorized individuals after these tragic events, American fiction on this very subject navigates "Otherness" in many contradictory ways, ranging from the resistance to represent it in literary forms to the desire of exploring, if not mastering it through characterization. He seems to raise the question of pluralism in the American context, discussing religion, beliefs, traditions, culture and way of life of the "Other". *Terrorist*, Anna Hartnell notes, is "a departure from the fictional representations of 9/11 produced by a number of literary heavyweights in the last few years" (478), and constitutes a rigid binary relation between East and West. The novel is set in a lifeless New Jersey industrial city, ironically named New Prospect, where a once prosperous and now stagnant economic development has transformed Victorian "suburban houses" into "housing" (95) and "inner city fields" into "congested slums" (96). Besides, *Terrorist* features characters whose ethnic, religious, and cultural differences are clear-cut and seemingly irreconcilable. The novel often reads like a thriller because of its inclusion of real political events and identity issues. The tale of a confused Arab-American teenager living between two worlds, one Eastern and the other Western, *Terrorist* also includes many allusions to the 9/11 aftermath, the war on Iraq, the American Revolution, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

For a prolific writer like Updike, the exploration of ethnic minority experience represents an admirable movement beyond his usual focus on white Middle America in relation to its construction of race, ethnicity, and religion. In *Terrorist*, he contrasts the perspective of a high school counselor (a middle-aged Jew) with that of a Muslim adolescent. In this way, Updike articulates unique but similar anxieties about an

Eastern or Arab "Other". For a peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures and religions, profounder insights into what is beyond cultural and religious differences are badly needed. It also transfers the polarity of good and evil to the dichotomy of the familiar and the unfamiliar and promotes the dubious idea that in certain cultures life is worth less than in others: "They're [Muslims] like Baptist fundamentalists, only worse, because they don't care if they die" (131). For this, Juanjo Bermúdez de Castro argues that "the inclination to identify Islam with the idea of death, and respectively the West with life was also very present among US 9/11 popular fictions" (5), finding its most reputed representative in John Updike's novel *Terrorist*.

Discussion

Though Updike tells *Terrorist* by third-person narration, his extensive use of dialogue as well as various central figures allow him to integrate a wide range of ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds against which Ahmad's conversion from moderate Muslim to jihadist can be measured. Apart from his Arab-American perspective, the novel lays emphasis on Ahmad's conversion through the eyes of his Irish-American mother. He is observed by the Jewish Levy [and his obese German-American (and Lutheran) wife, Beth]. Other sections are told from the point of view of Beth's sister, Hermione, who is an assistant to the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. Shaikh Rashid, whose teachings nurture Ahmad's angst and animosity against America and the West, also focalizes parts of the story, as do Ahmad's African American classmate, Joryleen, and, of course, his Lebanese American co-worker, the undercover CIA agent Charlie Chehab. Each of these viewpoints explains Ahmad's terrorist conversion in a different way; the tale of the terrorist emerges from the sum of all these often divergent perspectives.

Terrorist revolves around an Arab American youth called Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy. He is the only child of an Irish American nurse and an Egyptian exchange student. His father left the

United States after he had finished his studies, leaving Ahmad with the American mother. The absence of his father leads him to trust a Yemeni imam, Shaikh Rashid, who urges him to undertake jihad. After getting brainwashed by the imam (and having taken at face value the rants of Charlie Chehab), Ahmad volunteers to commit suicide terrorism in the Lincoln Tunnel. But Levy, his guidance counselor at Central High School, begins to sense the depths of Ahmad's disaffection. The story ends when Levy knows about Ahmad's mission just a few minutes before the bombing and marvelously he succeeds in convincing him to stand down and quit the mission.

In *Terrorist*, Updike paints an Eastern religion that reshapes the Western world that surrounds Ahmad. Thus, the narrative shows Ahmad's hostility as cultivated by a distorted version of his faith and rituals he received at the hands of a suspicious imam. In doing so, the narrator's desire to demonstrate the influence of Islam on Ahmad can be seen from the very beginning of the novel. In the incipient pages of the novel, the narrative makes clear that Ahmad sees and evaluates other characters by the standards of Islamic puritanism. He assesses the behavior of secular characters around him and condemns them in words full of acrimony and wrath. He perceives as decadence the eradication of religion as a constitutive system to guide people's lives: "Western culture is Godless... And because it has no God, it is obsessed with sex and luxury goods... the American way is the way of infidels. It is headed for a terrible doom" (38-39).

In *Terrorist*, Updike shows the social and cultural divide between Ahmed's Egyptian father and Irish-American mother. But Updike still identifies him with the East, being the background of his absent father. At another point, Ahmad says to Levy, "even the oil, they despised us, cheating the Saudi prince of their people's birthright" (295). This passage marks one moment of many where Ahmad identifies himself with an Eastern "us". He is consistently addressed by his fellow African American student Tylenol as an "Arab". Tylenol, Joryleen's boyfriend and later pimp, mocks at Ahmad: "Don't you talk to me of foolish—you so

foolish nobody give [sic] you shit, Arab" (16). Despite telling Levy that he is not a foreigner, Ahmad finds his identity in his Egyptian heritage and rarely makes reference to his Irish background. In other words, that Ahmad is identified at school as an "Arab" indicates that what marks him out from the American mainstream is not so much his religion but rather his ethnicity. Yet Ahmad is fully aware of the close affinity between Arab belonging and ethnic identity which he appears to undermine as simplistic. The narrator reveals that Ahmad despises his fellow American Muslims as well for they do not practice the precepts of Islam; religion for them is a matter of identity rather than an actual practice. Ahmad is angry with them to the extent that he does not like to be in Arab neighborhoods or even speak with them. Yet the novel attributes Ahmad's feeling of alienation and isolation from his high school peers to personality traits rather than to racial differences: "Though he was not the only Muslim believer at Central High, there were no others quite like him—of mixed parentage and still fervent in their faith, a faith chosen rather than merely inherited from a father present to reinforce fidelity. Ahmad was native-born, and in his travels through New Jersey he takes interest less in its pockets of a diluted Middle East than in the American reality all around" (177).

Thus, Ahmad, who willingly converted to Islam at the age of eleven, rejects the Western institutions that could provide authoritative orientation in a multicultural world: family and school. He also rejects his mother, because she leads a sexually debased life, at least seen from the angle of his Islamic belief. Of course, Ahmad's relationship with his mother is defined solely by his contempt for her corporeality: "I think my mother... sleeps with people easily. A nurse's aide is at home with the body, and she sees herself as a liberated modern person" (301). Updike gives no sense of their day-to-day relationship or the emotional history they have shared for nearly two decades. He does not even show why Ahmad's mother, "self-absorbed" (212) as she may be, hasn't wondered about her son's growing religious fervor or his desire to learn how to drive large trucks filled with hazardous materials, particularly

when all this is happening in the wake of 9/11. At school, by the same token, Ahmad rejects Levy as just another representative of the morally debased American culture. Thus, Ahmad begins to trust Shaikh Rashid, an immigrant imam from Yemen, with whom he continues to study the Qur'an and Arabic at the local mosque located in a strip mall, above a beauty shop and a check-cashing facility. Since Shaikh Rashid believes college will expose Ahmad to the corrupting influences of godless Western culture, he steers him towards vocational track. Hence, he provides him with a job as a truck driver at a local Lebanese furniture company, which will eventually become his apprenticeship as a suicide bomber. On this account, Updike has self-consciously attempted to cross a line to see the events from the perspective of the "Other", in this case Islam and Arab-Americans embodied in the characters of Ahmad, Shaikh Rashid and the Lebanese family. Yet his attempt to understand the mind of a potential terrorist is, as Hartnell notes, "drawn in strikingly religious terms, terms that threaten to reinstate, rather than transcend, the myth of hermetically sealed and timelessly opposed cultures" (484).

In *Terrorist*, it seems that Updike aims at representing a wide range of racially connoted attitudes in connection with a particular faith and within the delicate social equilibrium determined by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. For example, Ahmad thinks of his religious views as inseparable from his ethnicity. Moreover, he never condemns his father or shows the slightest sign of anger at his desertion. He persists in the man who has acted irresponsibly towards his family by abandoning them. Strikingly, Ahmad adopted Islam in the hope that he might find in this religion a "trace of the handsome father who had receded at the moment his memories were beginning" (100). He once tells Levy: "I would like, someday, to find him. Not to press any claim, or to impose any guilt, but simply to talk with him, as two Muslim men would talk" (36). Ahmad's idealization of his father is rendered obvious by the fact that his mother is very unlikely to have been the one to talk about her ex-husband's motivation for marriage in a self-degrading way and that it is impossible for the boy as a three-year-old to be aware of his father's

dissatisfaction with his career. Yet this reaction on the part of Ahmad towards his mother seems unfair when readers learn that it was she who has taken care of him all those years; she works to support him and he coldly calls her "trashy and immoral" (35). His misjudgment certainly gives rise to questions in the reader's mind as to Ahmad's reasons for making such misjudgment. Ahmad excuses his father because he is a Muslim and demeans his mother because she is not. Though many mothers would blame Ahmad in her situation, she surprisingly encourages him and his strong passion for Islam as she is used to "pick him up at the mosque after school in the winter months" (91) in spite of her being a lapsed Catholic. Further, she has "never tried to undermine his faith" (85) even though "Islam meant nothing to me [her]" since it "had a negative rating" (86) and appears as suspicious in the eyes of as many of their fellow Americans, especially in the wake of 9/11. She has always encouraged Ahmad to do whatever he wants to do, in this case be a devout Muslim, and has never stopped him from doing what she thinks is wrong.

In the same vein, while Ahmad is proud of his father's "baked" complexion (13), he despises his mother's mottled white Irish skin color as that of a "leper" (170). He tells Levy: "men of our Middle-Eastern blood—we mature quicker than Anglo-Saxons" (299). Likewise, Ahmad's fascination with his father clings to his memories, even though he was only three when his father fled. To Ahmad, his father represents a positive figure of power. He admires the man of whom he has only vague memories. Envisioning his father as an exotically handsome man, Ahmad cherishes his looks, which, his black hair and olive complexion (as opposed to his mother's Irish features), which, he is convinced, he has inherited from him. He once tells Levy: "I get my own personal neatness from him, I am sure" (36). His mother has been explicit in her opinion of her ex-husband to Ahmad and thinks that her son despises his father in a fashion similar to hers: "He [Ahmad] despises his father, as he should" (90). But Ahmad's respect for his mother as a Western and non-Muslim woman is so low that he lifts his father above anybody else. Ahmad regards his mother as an embarrassment that he

tries to hide (94) and her car is embarrassing too (154). He thinks she wears indecent clothes, for her outfit is different from what Muslim women wear. He even asks her to wear a headscarf on his high school graduation ceremony, because he does not want his mother to look like a "whore" (116). Furthermore, the narrator discloses that Ahmad considers his mother a "mistake that his father made but that he [Ahmad] never would" (170), and he wishes to disown her as she embarrasses him "whenever they venture together in public" (141) as she lavishes her flirtations upon men "at the expense of her son's dignity" (141). Even when he walks beside her in stores or around the city, Ahmad is "embarrassed by the mismatch of her freckles with his own dun skin" (151). Besides, with his mixed-blood background, Ahmad sees his dun skin as receding into the background where only God will notice his virtues. Accordingly, he is fascinated with his African American classmate, Joryleen Grant, since "his taste developed in his years at Central High, is for darker skins, cocoa and caramel and chocolate" (170) and for dark eyes whose blackness, opaque at first glance, deepens to the purple of plums or the glinting brown of syrup—what in the Qur'an figure as *large dark eyeballs, kept close in their pavilions* (170 italics Updike)¹.

Apparently, Ahmad's malevolent feelings towards his mother seem inexplicable, but as cognizant of his thoughts, the narrator often reminds that the reason for his unusual behavior is because his mother is irreligious. This in a time while he adores his absent father, who was never religious himself: "it [Islam] meant not much more to his father. Omar never went to a mosque" (86). The narrator consolidates the idea that Ahmad despises his mother for she does not believe in the God he believes in. In fact, the novel reveals that Terry has gone through a number of relationships, which must be rather disturbing to Ahmad. Yet Ahmad rejects the Western mentality that permits his mother to experiment with interpersonal relationships at the expense of a harmonious family life, ignoring that his father was the one to act disruptively to their original unity. The narrator tells that Ahmad sees his mother as "a typical American woman lacking strong convictions and the courage and comfort they

bring" and "she is a victim of the American religion of freedom" (167) which, as James Schiff puts it, "can lead even to freedom from God" (147).

Apart from his scornful view of his mother, Ahmad's racially encoded attitudes towards his black American classmates do not successfully initiate him into American culture but rather signify his incorporation of racism. Updike depicts Ahmad as an outsider who keeps recoiling into further isolation. The author attributes Ahmad's feelings to his religious belief which "holds him rather aloof from his classmates and the studies on the curriculum" (8). Updike, Richard Gray notes, "captures this sense, not merely of not belonging but of not feeling safe, of fearing that the world Ahmad inhabits is eating away at the very core of his belief and his self" (135-136). Accordingly, at school, the readers see his classmate, Joryleen Grant, trying to have a conversation with the always depressed and serious Muslim student and ask him to learn to smile more. But Ahmad acts unfriendly to her and imagines her roasting in Hell. When she invites him to hear her singing in the church choir, he is shocked and repelled: "I am not of your faith" (10). Joryleen assures him this is not a problem, "Oh, I don't take that all that seriously" (10). Unmoved by her kindness, Ahmad still regards her as one of the devils who are busy in seducing the pious. Upon this incident, Tylenol, Joryleen's boyfriend and future pimp, ambushes Ahmad to pay him back for hurting his girlfriend's feelings. When he asks him why he has insulted Joryleen's religion, Ahmad replies, "her religion is the wrong one" (15). Tylenol explains he does not disrespect Black Muslims, but Ahmad deserves to be disdained for his insulting behavior. Tylenol makes it clear that he has no problem with other Muslims, but has a problem with Ahmad because he has offended Joryleen through attacking her religious practices. When Ahmad tries to inform him that "it was simple friendliness your [his] type wouldn't understand", Tylenol replies roughly: "My type, what is that? My type has no use for your type, that's the truth..." (16). Thus, Updike depicts Ahmad as being alienated from the Western teenage reality of the twenty-first century, which is turned into a threat to his

manhood when Tylenol calls him a “weird queer” and “faggot” (16).

Had the confrontation between Tylenol and Ahmad remained exclusively verbal, Ahmad would have triumphed over the bully thanks to his eloquence and quick-wittedness. Tylenol seems to be aware of his humble verbal competence with which he is incapable of competing with the model student. He tries to compensate for his lack of articulacy by giving Ahmad the earlier verbal abuse. However, Ahmad does not fully descend to his adversary’s level by equally succumbing to the use of swear words, but he adapts to the other boy’s language by reverting to the African American vernacular. Yet Ahmad does not so much blame the other boy as “he [Tylenol] is just a robot of meat, a body too full of its juices and reflexes to have a brain...” (17). He tries to defend his pride in front of people whom he usually thinks of as “computer nerds”, “do-nothings” (16), “Miss Populars” and “little whores” (17). He does not also derive his strength from the support of a crowd of peers like Tylenol, but the African American nevertheless seems to have offended his manly pride. As much as Ahmad despises the vanity of his superficial school mates, “he does not wish his body marred” by an outbreak of Tylenol’s rage for he “cherish[es] his ripened manhood” (18).

Nevertheless, despite Levy’s attempts to make him appreciate his position as a member of a “diverse and tolerant society” (39), Ahmad persists in regarding multiculturalism as evidence of a disabling lack of conviction on America’s part. He repeats the view of his teacher, Shaikh Rashid, that “a relativistic approach trivializes religion, implying that it doesn’t matter much. You believe this, I believe that, we all get along – that’s the American way” (39). Consequently, he finds no similarities in the people around him. He even feels out of place in Arab American living spaces. As the text tells, Ahmad’s disdain towards Muslims in the Arab American community in New Jersey derives in part from his sense that their faith is a matter of little more than ethnic affiliation. While ethnic marginalization in part motivated Ahmad at 11 years old to repudiate the American mainstream, his assumption of an

Islamic identity seems to offer no ethnic solidarity but rather-- paradoxically-- a way out of the complications of group identity. When travelling to the suburbs of New Prospect to deliver furniture for the Chehabs, where immigrants of decades before have by now blended in, Ahmad thinks through the omniscient narrator that: “the younger Arab Americans, idle and watchful, have adopted the bulky running shoes, droopy oversized jeans, and hooded sweatshirts of black homeys. Ahmad, in his prim white shirt and his black jeans slim as two stovepipes, would not fit in here. To these co-religionists, Islam is less a faith...than a habit, a face of their condition as an underclass, alien in a nation that persists in thinking of itself as light-skinned, English-speaking, and Christian” (244). The narrator adds that “Ahmad feels his pride of isolation and willed identity to be threatened by the masses of ordinary, hard-pressed men and plain, practical women who are enrolled in Islam as a lazy matter of ethnic identity” (177). Thus, it is clear that his admiration of and idealization of his absent father does not entail imitation, since Ahmad is a devoted believer and his interest in his father’s ethnic background does not exceed the domain of religion – the “exploration of his Islamic identity ends at the mosque” (99). Certainly, Ahmad does not identify with this group: “To Ahmad these blocks feel like an underworld he is timidly visiting, an outsider among outsiders” (244). Ahmad thus occupies a peculiarly doubled position: sinister in that he cloaks his increasingly militant Muslim identity under the guise of his American one; innocent in that he is seduced from his American identity by a religious culture marked foreign. As John Strawson writes, “there appears to be no other space for Muslims in post-September 11 America” (cited in Hartnell 492). Thinking about his identity as an American Muslim, Ahmad finds contradictions:

He has asked that his paychecks . . . be made out to Ahmad Ashmawy, though he still lives with his mother. Because his Social Security and driver’s license both list his last name as Mulloy, she has gone with him downtown to the bank, in one of the new glass buildings, to explain, and to make out new forms for a separate account. That is how she is these days: she makes no resistance to him,

though she never made much. His mother is, he sees now, looking back, a typical American, lacking strong convictions and the courage and comfort they bring. She is a victim of the American religion of freedom, freedom above all, though freedom to do what and to what purpose is left up in the air" (167-68).

Thus, the novel makes religious differences play an important part in Ahmad's failed Americanization. He continuously contrasts nominally Christian or Jewish Americans against their Muslim counterparts, for whom religion still has a strong presence in people's lives: "There is no *ummah* [nation based on one creed]² here... no encompassing structure of divine law that brings men rich and poor to bow down shoulder to shoulder, no code of self-sacrifice, no exalted submission such as lies at the heart of Islam, its very name... Instead there is a clashing diversity of private self-seeking..." (167-168). When Ahmad watches television, he searches it "for traces of God in this infidel society (196)". Ordinary Americans in the street are "devils" (3) who are trying to take his faith away from him. Updike strikes a note while he comments on Ahmad's stance towards Americans and considering them as "devils". He observes, "the notion of the world being full of devils who are trying to take your faith from you appeared to me in a Christian context at first, but it is really more apt in an Islamic context... So it's a good, plausible religious context for a sense that the world is alien, is something else, is something not paradise, is trying to take your faith and your companionship with God from you" (Witt 3). As is clear, Updike seems to say that Ahmad despises the American society around him because he wrongly thinks that Islam and its Scripture guarantee such conduct: "The sheikh hesitates, and then speaks as if quoting a sacred text: "The unclean can appear to shine, and devils do good imitations of angels... Beware of anyone, however, pleasing, who distracts you from Allah's pure being" (109). Ahmad explains bitterly that "the entire world is such a distraction" (109). On account of this depiction, Amitav Ghosh asserts that Updike, though clearly at some pains to familiarize himself with Islam and the Qur'an, is

"unable to cut his brown characters loose from texts, scriptures and ideologies" (2).

Ahmad perceives his own "dun complexion" as "superior" to the whiteness of his mother and the rough and ignorant African American blackness of Tylenol. It is through Ahmad's eyes, too, that readers see Tylenol's mother, who has, absurdly, named a child for a pharmaceutical product she hears on a TV commercial and likes its melodic tone (15). Ahmad's suspicion of whiteness, on the other hand, makes its way into his religious instincts. This notion that physical markers are the gauge of belief in fact mirrors Ahmad's anxieties about his own faith - which also seem to find physical reflection in the Irish green color that pervades his brown eyes to betray his relationship to whiteness.

Updike points out that the notion of cultural practice may include not only religious denomination but also, perhaps surprisingly, dress code. Ahmad's clothes signal his alienation and isolation from the society in which he lives. His immaculate "white shirt" (9), the narrative implies, defies the sartorial standards of the inner city or ghettos. "His shirts come back stiffened by cardboard from the cleaners, whose bills he pays out of the money he earns clerking at the Tenth Street Shop-a-Sec..." (9-10). This aggressively white shirt, Updike notes, symbolizes that of a martyr. Ahmad, that is, engages in a kind of sartorial prolepsis, wearing the martyr's white shirt well before he sets out to commit his planned suicide attack. Interestingly, as the scheduled time of the attack approaches, readers come to know that "a certain simplicity does lay hold of Ahmad in the troughs between surges of terror and then of exaltation" (251). This "newly elevated and simplified sense of himself" (250) takes on the absolutist shades of black and white that colour Ahmad's daily uniform that Updike marks Islam with: "Islam doesn't have as many shades of gray as the Christian or the Judaic faith does. It's fairly absolutist... you're either in or not" (Witt 3).

According to Mita Banerjee, Updike has thus "excluded Arab Americans, on account of both a lesser, potentially suspect whiteness and an outlandish cultural practice, from his national

imaginary”. Noting the symbolism of this code of dress, she claims that *Terrorist* “can thus in fact be seen to revoke the citizenship of Arab-Americans in the twenty-first century” (27). Pamela Mansutti does not agree. She argues that Updike in fact “questions the cultural imperialism of whiteness by making the ethnic gaze of the young Arab American protagonist, Ahmad, the gaze we side with throughout the story”. Through Ahmad, Mansutti notes, Updike “unmasks the decay of post-9/11 US society” and a “cultural inertia” that lingers in the peripheral underbelly of America” (213).

The oddness of Ahmad’s speech matches the oddness of his crisp white shirt. Both features spell out a discord between his own feelings of alienation and the dominant culture around him. All these depictions given to Ahmad try to convince the readers that he is outsider and does not belong here. He seems to be associated with an ontologically distinct Eastern culture that Updike contrasts against the materialism of America and the West in general. It is noteworthy that in the beginning of his novel, Updike immediately underscores the phenomenological eccentricity in Ahmad’s worldview: “*Devils*, Ahmad thinks. *These devils seek to take away my God. All day long...What else is there to see?*” (3 italics Updike). Whereas his classmates experience the world as a set of materialist forces, Ahmad experiences it as inflated with spiritual dimensions that are inaccessible to the Western citizen. “The halls of the high school smell of perfume and bodily exhalations, of chewing gum and impure cafeteria food, and of cloth” (7). Again, Ahmad purposefully resists and even despises the “impure” materials that form this empirical matrix for the West. His perception of his fellow citizens is one of people who have been led astray from the virtuous path of honesty and restraint by the lure of capitalism. He sees his teachers as the “troublemakers, worldly and cynical and just in it for the paycheck—the short hours and summer vacations. He thinks they set poor examples” (85). Moreover, he has contempt for the fragmentary and evanescent pleasures and goods that Americans consume to the point of wanting to take violent action against them. Updike makes it clear that Ahmad is an unnatural

fit for these Western terrains. Thus, Ahmad’s Eastern heritage seems naturally to offer itself as attractive to American decadence.

Interestingly, in spite of Updike’s trenchant critique of American culture and consumerism in *Terrorist*, the readers can see a resurfacing of the theme of American innocence. This innocence leads Habib Chehab, a Lebanese American, to ponder over the animosity and hatred which Arab terrorists harbor for the United States which opens its gates for immigrants from the four corners of earth: “America. I don’t understand this hatred... Christian, Jew, Arab, indifferent, black, white, in between—everybody get along. If you have something good to sell, people buy. If you have job to do, people do it. Everything is clear, on surface” (147). He further defends America against Ahmad’s accusation of the country as being a “prison”: “You have never known a prison. In this country, people have no fear of prison. Not like Old World. Not like Saudis, not like Iraq before... They are for criminals, the prisons... In this country, the average man knows nothing about prisons. The average man has no fear. He does his job. He obeys the laws. They are easy laws” (148). In the same vein, Ahmad’s repulsion of the physical as well as his permeability to mental manipulation by the imam attests to his adolescent innocence. His being caught between two cultures that appear to be of an insurmountable incongruity to him, reflects Ahmad’s juvenile confusion, his difficulty with coming to terms with the changes affecting his life: “*The world is difficult*, he thinks, *because devils are busy in it, confusing things and making the straight crooked*” (11 italics Updike). Further, Ahmad does not realize until very late that the Muslims he is introduced to after his consent to the terrorist act, commit atrocities under the guise of religion as they “fight for God against America” (248). On the day scheduled for the mission, Ahmad is supposed to meet with Charlie at the furniture store, but the latter is not there: “Ahmad has not been told the combination. He understands the message: he must have faith in his brothers, just as they have faith in him, in their unexplained absence, to proceed with the plan” (284). John Strawson notes, “all the conspirators that lure Ahmad into the terrorist plot “are either

foreigners or speak Arabic as their first language;" so "despite Updike's portrayal of Ahmad as 'American' [...] it is this very American 'ness' that opens him to be manipulated by foreign influences" (cited in Hartnell 492).

In *Terrorist*, Updike argues that Islam enshrines spirituality while the West has abandoned its religion for materialism. In other words, it is through the character of Ahmad that Updike wants to show that Islam is not only a religion but a practical way of life, a lived religion that ultimately does not distinguish between private belief and public agency. This creed is juxtaposed with the apathy and superficiality of Western society, which is made up of people who have no control over their lives and mostly carry on in a moral vacuum. Ahmad, like many young Muslims, believes that "unseen materialist forces" are "working their will upon him" (5). In his delivery trips throughout New Jersey, Ahmad feels pity for the American youth:

Ahmad sees through Excellency's high windshield clots of males and females his age gathering in gabbling idleness...A kind of terror at the burden of having a life to live hits Ahmad through the dusty windshield glare. These doomed animals gathered in the odor of mating and mischief yet have the comfort of their herded kindred, and each harbors some hope or plan of a future, a job, a destination, an aspiration if only to rise in the ranks of dope dealers or pimps. Whereas he, Ahmad, with abilities that Mr. Levy had told him were ample, has no plan: the God attached to him like an invisible twin, his other self, is a God not of enterprise but of submission... It is as if in the delicious sleep of his devotion to Allah his future has been amputated" (184).

By the same token, Ahmad senses the American spiritual vacuity: "Infidels, they think safety lies in accumulation of the things of this world, and in the corrupting diversions of the television set. They are slaves to images, false ones of happiness and affluence. But even true images are sinful imitations of God, who alone can create" (4). He also feels emptiness in himself: "The burning misery of separation from God and the scorching of our remorse for our sins against His [Allah's] commands" (6). Yet by laying emphasis on

religion, Updike has been perceived as seems to raise the old interreligious clash between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Hartnell, for example, claims that "Islam is measured against an implicitly Christian model of religion and is found wanting, and thus Updike participates in a long tradition of Orientalist stereotyping of Islam" (495). Updike presents this spiritualism as a threat to western values and freedom. Hence, "people are so afraid of the Arabs" (138). Yet Ahmad's endorsement of Islam cannot and will not let him accept Western values, ethics, attitudes and the social-political standards and practices. Ahmad, whose religious convictions allow him to be "above it all" (84), feels that his alienation from the secular society around him keeps him clean: "Ahmad feels clean in the truck, cut off from the base world... he feels clean and free" (157). He once tells Charlie: "I have a God to whom I turn five times a day. My heart needs no other companion" (214). He explains his stern attitude towards life by saying that he is a "good Muslim in a world that mocks faith" (69). The narrator also discloses that "Ahmad's insides are clenched shut, filled with the All-Encompassing (95). Thus, the presence of Allah inside Ahmad's heart has, according to Updike, blindly and narrowly shut him from human interaction. Terry once tells Levy: "He's always seemed so alone. He did this Allah thing all by himself" (117). Thus, he has no need for companions for he strongly believes that Allah is his close companion, "*closer to him than his neck-vein*" (145 italics Updike)³, and "He [Allah] is inside me [him] and at my [his] side" (42). This idea is affirmed many times in the novel. As a result of Ahmad's strong belief in the presence of Allah, as the narrator explains, he is "wrapped in his sensation of God standing beside him" (144). Updike even suggests that believing in Allah prevents Ahmad from living his life as it kept him aloof from his fellow Americans. As Kyle A. Pasewark observes, "Updike's main characters lack a meaningful relation to ordinary life. His ministers, for their part, generally either reemphasize the insistence on achievements and activity that we cannot fulfill or separate heaven and earth so that religion refers only to a realm above us from which we are infinitely separated except in rare moments of clarity". Pasewark

adds, “what Updike’s central characters lack is a religious relation to ordinary life and consequently their attempts to achieve grace, to be found worthy by God and others, rely on deception and manipulation, on falsifying and distorting love” (262). These religious feelings, which keep Ahmad away from life, even surprise his religious mentor: “The student's faith exceeds the master's; it frightens Shaikh Rashid to be riding the winged white steed of Islam, its irresistible onrushing” (7).

As he strives to guard his Islamic identity from being dissolved in the American melting pot, Ahmad resolves to protect himself from interacting with other members of the community he lives in. He goes as far as fearing to eat outside for he suspects the uncleanness of restaurants: “perhaps there will be a cup of yogurt in the refrigerator, or he else must risk the doubtful cleanness” (109) of the shop’s snack provisions. Ahmad even balks at the idea of consorting with Joryleen for he thinks Shaikh Rashid would disapprove of it. He even considers answering Joryleen's questions about the validity of Islamic mandates a kind of betraying of his religion. When Shaikh Rashid finds out that Ahmad has gone to the church, he blames him for doing so and warns him against going there once again: “I trust you will not be returning to the kafir church in the center of town...The unclean can appear to shine, and devils do good imitations of angels. Keep to the Straight Path...” (109). The reason is to eschew anything that might distract Ahmad from “Allah's pure being” (109). Ahmad even admits to Charlie that his faith “stood between [him] and his mother” (212). It also seems that Ahmad’s imam’s negative attitudes towards women have made an impression on the young boy. Even while he denounces the materialism of the West, Updike foregrounds the ideological divide and subsequent incompatibility of these worldviews. This registers in Ahmad’s social interactions with Joryleen and her boyfriend Tylenol. In the depictions of Joryleen and Tylenol, Updike condemns American materialism. He describes Ahmad’s condemnation of Tylenol in some detail: Ahmad “does not so much blame the boy—he is just a robot of meat, a body too full of his juices and reflexes to have a brain—as he

blames Joryleen” (17). Whereas these proximate Americans are composed of crude materials and primitive instincts, Ahmad is dominated by a spiritual drive toward cleanliness and purity. He is fierce in his need for purity, fierce in his loathing for the emptiness of matter itself and of all material things, from his own flesh to the excessive furnishing of the American world: “In the past year he has grown three inches, to six feet — more unseen material forces working their will upon him. He will not grow any taller, he thinks, in this life or the next” (5). These pointed descriptions recapitulate Ahmad’s feeling of “Otherness” and “Arabness”. In his interview with Louise Witt for *MSNBC*, Updike himself conveys Ahmad’s notion of uncleanness: “The notion of purity is very important in Islam, and a lot of the negative warlike actions taken against us have to do with our physical presence in the Middle East” (2).

The secular and liberal elements that mark Levy and Terry translate into the spiritual and immaterial forces of Ahmad who insists that “*the world is difficult... because devils are busy in it, confusing things and making the straight crooked*” (11 italics Updike). Ahmad’s phenomenological experience of devils and other spiritual forces transforms his spiritual worldview into a quasi-magical or “unseen” experience of the world. Yet these stereotypes remain essential to the construction of the Western citizen as well as to the Western spaces. In making Ahmad’s fundamentalism admirable for being so pure amidst the pathetic cultural surroundings – until the imam and his terrorist network drive his belief to violence, “Updike, Mansutti claims, implicitly reinforces the novel’s underlying assumption about the US dearth of public commitment and subservience to the material religion of capitalism” (216).

As far as American multiculturalism is concerned, two incidents in the narrative are of interest. Such examples may serve in diagnosing the intercultural differences and disclose to what extent such differences help in widening the East-West divide and promoting the cultural and religious dualisms Updike occasionally adduces here. The first incident takes place inside an

African American church Ahmad visits at the invitation of his classmate, Joryleen, to hear her sing in the choir. In fact, Ahmad's time in the African American church serves to remind the reader of his displacement within Western contexts. For Ahmad, Joryleen is the ultimate "Other": female versus male, Christian versus Muslim, voluptuous and promiscuous versus prim, proper, and repressed. Initially, Ahmad wants to resist Joryleen's invitation to her church where he would be liable to see the "the windows of this church, blasphemously assigning God a face, and gesturing hands, sandaled feet, and tinted robes—in short, a human body with all that is unclean and encumbering about it" (14); or he would be obliged to "sit with kinky-haired kafirs, the singe of Hellfire on them like the brown skin on barbecued drumsticks" (17). In her strangeness, Joryleen is a gift to Ahmad. As her surname signifies, Joryleen "grants" Ahmad access to realms of experience that lie outside the limited scope of his training in piety. As in Updike's hands both characters are sketched as complex individuals, they supersede racial or religious stereotypes. In themselves, the encounters between the Muslim and the black youths in the church contain, Versluys observes, "all the promise and the richness of American multiculturalism" (176).

After his initial refusal, however, Ahmad accepts Joryleen's invitation to come and hear her sing in the choir of her church. In this set piece, multiculturalism is imaged as a shock to Ahmad. His sudden disappointment and ignorance lead to some dramatic irony and mild intercultural humor. When looking up in the church, Ahmad stares uncomprehendingly at a "high, grimy triple window showing a pigeon about to alight on the head of a white-bearded man" (49). This failure to recognize and identify Christian symbols is only part of the unease he feels. He notices how, in contradistinction to the customs at the mosque, the congregants are arranged in "receding rows of seated and sexually mixed people" (49). This offhand remark is developed into an in-depth appreciation of how religion becomes the lived stuff of life, a matter not merely of conviction and faith, but also of tactile sensations and ingrained protocol. "Accustomed to worshippers squatting

and kneeling on a floor, emphasizing God's height above them, Ahmad feels, even seated, dizzily, blasphemously tall" (50). Religion and ritual turn into habitus, a series of relaxations that may be more decisive in anchoring identity than mere dogma or orthodoxy. It is through small details like these that Ahmad, as a devout Muslim, comes into his own and the discomfiting impact of his visit to the church is made palpable. He had hoped to sneak into the church unobserved. Of course, Ahmad is out of place in this church and, more importantly, he is struck by the materiality of the place of worship. He hears the "giddy murmur of greetings and the crackle of heavy rumps shifting on the wooden pews" (49). All this seems to Ahmad more like a "movie theatre before the movie starts than a holy mosque, with its thick muffling rugs and empty tiled mihrab [pulpit] and the liquid chants, *la ilaha ilia Allah* [There is no God but Allah], emitted by men fragrant [sic] of their menial Friday labors and, in their rhythmic unison of obeisance, crammed together as closely as the segments of a worm" (49-50). Unlike the mosque, which is a "domain of men", the congregants in the church include "women in their spring shimmer, their expansive soft flesh, dominate" (50). Yet Ahmad is welcomed and "tenaciously greeted" (50) by an usher, who leads him to one of the front pews. He is joined by a "large black family," and in acknowledgment of his displacement the patriarch of the brood "reaches over the laps of several small daughters to offer Ahmad his broad brown hand and a smile of welcome in which a gold tooth gleams" (50). Contrary to his expectations, Ahmad is impressed by the "kafir friendliness" (51) especially when one of the little girls keeps looking at him during the Mass, curiously and entreatingly, with "bright dog-eyes" (63). He is also impressed by the preacher's story about "Moses who led the chosen people out of slavery and yet was himself denied admission to the Promised Land" (52). He finds himself "getting excited along with the rest of the congregation" (59) and even responds with the congregation to the preacher's questions. Yet earlier he tells Joryleen that her religion is the wrong one, and presently he feels that she has lured him into such a "sticky trap" (51). He feels, too, that he is

indulging in shameful voyeurism. When finally the little girl snuggles up against him (to fall asleep in his lap a little later), "he stiffly ignores her, looking straight ahead" (63). Having previously observed that singing about Jesus is "abhorrent" (8), Ahmad now tells that Joryleen that her voice is "pure" but her singing of Jesus is "not pure" (68). He perceives the Christian religion as one with "three-headed idol," and he experiences a feeling of "impure trespass for witnessing these black unbelievers" (62). He even does not smile back to a little girl who keeps smiling at him. So, believing in God is not enough for Ahmad as he despises and hates all non-Muslims since they believe in God in a way different from his.

Most importantly, Ahmad's feeling of hostility and intolerance in this multicultural incident is meant to be contrasted with the tolerance of Joryleen. When she asks if she can go to visit his mosque as she invited him to her church, Ahmad declines her request and says, "that would not do" as both men and women cannot mix and "sit together", and she could not attend without a "course of instruction" and a "demonstration of sincerity" (69). As is clear, Ahmad's response shows a sense of inflexibility and rigidity in Islam which is completely different from the flexibility and simplicity of Joryleen's attitude when she invites him to visit the church. Yet one might say that by outlining affinities with Ahmad and comparing his fervor with that of other religious faiths, Updike, as Morley notes too, "does not avoid the clichés and stereotypes of ranting mad suicide-bombers that abound in the American media". She believes that by empathizing with Ahmad, by offering a sympathetic portrayal of faith, doubt, and confusion, Updike offers his readership a more complex terrorist, and a much more reductive picture [sic] than that which the critics applaud" (255). In other words, though Ahmad is portrayed in a somewhat sympathetic light, the overall narrative still relies on the spatial East-West divisions as Ahmad's Eastern religion and consequent terrorist activity pose a terrible threat to America.

Another example of this American multiculturalism takes place between Ahmad and Levy at the end of the novel. These characters are structural foils for one another. Updike handles their differences in a thoroughly oppositional way. Ahmad is an eighteen-year-old, virginal, half-Egyptian Muslim, while Levy is an aged, adulterous, Jewish atheist. In a great interethnic and interreligious encounter and as a further confirmation of the potential of American pluralism, the trip to the Lincoln Tunnel is an act of taking stock for both characters. Throughout the novel, Ahmad's reaction towards Levy's attempt to help him is the same as his attitude towards all other non-Muslim characters around him, including his own mother. Feeling sorry for the clever student with potential who has switched to the vocational track instead of continuing his college education, Levy strives to convince Ahmad to continue his education. When Levy undertakes to convince Ahmad that acting in accordance with Shaikh Rashid's advice would be a waste of high school years and the high grades he scored, Ahmad defends his religious mentor and affirms that what he will do is the right decision, for he cannot finance his own education. In fact, Ahmad knows he "must have a future, but it seems insubstantial to him, and repels his interest. *The only guidance*, says the third sura, *is the guidance of Allah*" (18 italics Updike). He also blames his own mother for not completing her education which would have enabled her to get a better job to afford his academic expenses: "My mother fancies herself an artist; she stopped her own education at the level of nurse's aide, rather than invest two more years in her own education when I was a pre-school child" (40). He, however, sees Levy as one of the devils that try to take his faith away from him. When Levy touches him on his shoulder, as a sign of kind concern, Ahmad loathes the "presumptuous poisonous touch" (92) as he loathes "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" (94). In spite of this maltreatment on the part of Ahmad, Levy calls him "my friend" (43, 79, 94, 308) and "son" (80), but Ahmad still perceives him as a devil and an enemy. In contrast

to Ahmad's rude manner, Levy bears good feelings towards the young Muslim and affirms to Terry: "I feel a fondness for him, though I suspect it's not reciprocated" (117). However, Levy shows admiration of and concern for Ahmad, recognizing the man's "dignity" and "presence" (92).

Levy's care and interest contrast with Shaikh Rashid's manipulation of Ahmad. Levy and Terry blame the imam for poisoning the boy's thoughts. Interviewing Ahmad at school, Levy recognizes that the boy's diction does not come to him naturally as he seems as if "he is imitating" some adult he knows, a "smooth and formal talker" (34). Also, Shaikh Rashid's insistence that Ahmad forgo college to drive the delivery truck for the Chehab irritates Levy enough for him to seek out Ahmad's mother to meet with her about the boy's future: "Somebody's putting pressure on Ahmad, for whatever reason. He can do better than be a trucker. He's a smart, clean-cut kid, with a lot of inner-directedness" (83). Her response to Levy's pitch advocating a college education for Ahmad reveals that she is aware of how much her son has been influenced by the teachings of the imam: "at this phase of his development he sees what college offers, those subjects... as part of godless Western culture, and he doesn't want more of it than he absolutely can't avoid" (85). As a result, Levy is "knocking himself out to get this boy out of the grip of his mosque" (131) that leads Ahmad to abandon his future. Shaikh Rashid is also the source that passes on jihadist thinking to Ahmad with a "dangerous slyness" (145). Terry sees the imam "terrible" and "creepy" (88) and discloses to Levy that even Ahmad "distrusts him" (166). In fact, "there is in his [Shaikh Rashid's] regard of Ahmad something fraternal and sardonic, a splinter of hostility" (145). Updike implies that Shaikh Rashid maintains this feeling because of Ahmad's mixed race. To him, "Ahmad is American. No amount of zeal and Qur'an studies can change his mother's race or his father's absence" (145).

Levy, ironically half-suicidal himself, plays a major part in thwarting the terrorist mission Ahmad was recruited by the Arab terrorist organization to carry out. When Levy gains entry

into the explosive-laden truck, he and Ahmad become almost allegorical in their isolation, their propinquity, and their cross purposes. Two Americans enact a strange inter-civilizational encounter. It is also inter-generational. "There had been a father who vanished before his [Ahmad's] memory could take a picture of him, and then Charlie had been friendly and shown him the roads, and now this tired Jew in clothes as if he dressed in the dark has taken their place, the empty space beside him" (290). Catherine Morley believes that this alignment, of Levy and Ahmad in the same truck, seems deliberately designed on the part of Updike to "highlight the comparative elements of the American and the Muslim 'Other', to show how closely aligned both really are" (90). In other words, by juxtaposing the lives of a fanatic, self-marginalized, eighteen-year-old Arab-American Ahmad and the middle-aged, non-observant Jewish school counselor, Levy, Updike effectively crystallizes post-9/11 American types of religious and racial identity.

Moreover, the struggle of words, of rhetoric, between Levy and Ahmad in the truck as they drive through New Jersey and eventually into Manhattan is clearly a battle of ideas, an exchange on religion and politics. But it is also a struggle for power, ending with the ultimate victory of the white-haired Levy over the young Ahmad. When Levy puts his life on the line to dissuade Ahmad from killing hundreds of people, he tells him: "I was born fallen away. My father hated Judaism, and his father before him. They blamed religion for the world's misery—it reconciled people to their problems. Then they subscribed to another religion, Communism. But you don't want to hear this". Ahmad replies: "I don't mind. It is good for us to seek agreement. Before Israel, Muslims and Jews were brothers—they belonged to the margins of the Christian world, the comic others in their funny clothes, entertainment for the Christians secure in their wealth, in their paper-white skins" (295). As is clear, Ahmad's historical allusions emphasize his estrangement from white, Christian American society. Initially unable to convince Ahmad not to push the button, the world-weary Levy is quite ready to die. His weariness and his disgust with

the way things are in America are such that they override his feeble will to live.

Nevertheless, faced with the task of giving Ahmad a reason to live and let live, Levy tries to remind him that he, namely Ahmad, himself is an American citizen and the product of a multicultural union: "Hey, come on, we're all Americans here. That's the idea; didn't they tell you that at Central High? Irish-Americans, African-Americans, Jewish Americans; there are even Arab-Americans" (301). Here, Updike seems to say that a belief in American multiculturalism is the only good reason a human being could have for staying alive: "You believe this; I believe that, we all get along" (36). Yet John-Paul Colgan believes that despite Levy's invoking a utopian version of the melting pot ideal as he attempts to dissuade Ahmed from carrying out his plan, Updike's use of "perspectives produced by multiculturalism as a means of imagining a terrorist critique of America gestures, perhaps inadvertently, toward the views of American critics of multiculturalism, such as Samuel Huntington⁴ and Lawrence Auster, who see it as a fundamentally anti-Western ideology". He contends that this is not to suggest that Updike is himself hostile to multiculturalism, but by "constructing viewpoints that develop as a result of multicultural contact, Updike is able to comment critically on the nature of American progress to a degree that would not otherwise be possible" (129).

Though Levy's presence with him in the truck unsettles Ahmad, it is the playful attention of two black children in the back seat of the car in front of them that finally deflects the young Muslim from this terrible and misguided mission. The kids "are not neglectfully dressed but in the same carefully careless, ironically gaudy clothes that white children would be wearing on a family expedition. This black family was doing well, until Ahmad waved them ahead of him into line" (299). Ahmad estimates the girl's age to be three, the age at which "his father turned his back on him and fled: he had often reflected that at three a child can talk, he can run, he is a person, he can plead and grieve and shed sore tears. He must have wept but remembers nothing of this time"

(303). When Ahmad decides not to set off his explosion, "he lifts the fingers of his right hand from the steering wheel and waves them, like the legs of a beetle on its back. Recognized at last, the children smile, and Ahmad cannot but smile back" (307).

In this respect, the novel gains depth and narrative momentum from the fact that Ahmad's explicit religious instruction and his progress on the way to self-sacrifice is paralleled by his gradual discovery of a transcendence that is inherent in the meanest of objects—a transcendence that vouchsafes creation rather than destruction and elicits sympathy rather than condemnation. There is also a scene in which he spares the life of an insect. On the morning of the scheduled suicide bombing day, Ahmad finds a beetle trapped on its back, kicking its legs in the air. He attempts to rescue this small insect by flipping it over onto its feet: "Ahmad rises from his seat on the coarse plank step and stands over the insect in lordly fashion, feeling huge...[H]e manages, after a few tentative, squeamish attempts, to flip the tiny creature at his mercy onto its legs" (253). Even though he has a timetable to follow, Ahmad watches the bug for a full five minutes that "partake of the eternal" (254). He feels the presence of God in the death of the beetle: "It had been on its back in its death throes and now is dead, leaving behind a largeness that belongs not to this world. The experience, so strangely magnified, has been, Ahmad feels certain, supernatural. (254).

At the last moment, then, in the presence of another American minority, Ahmad experiences an epiphany. Recognizing the irreducible uniqueness and undeniable appeal of his fellow human beings, he sees that neither logic nor true religion demands this annihilation. Looking at the face of his own human other, he realizes his desire to "see the face of God" (303). Not that he fully understands, for this is an insight shared only by a humane author and sensitive reader. What Ahmad does understand is the real spirit of the Qur'an: "*We created you: will you not credit us? Behold the semen you discharge: did you create it, or We?*"⁵ God does not want to destroy: it was He who made the world... He does not want

us to desecrate His creation by willing death. He wills life” (306 italics Updike). At the last minute, it is not Levy’s pleading but Ahmad's own inner guidance system that gets the better of him.

Shortly thereafter, “all emerge into the dull but brightening light of another Monday in Manhattan. Whatever was making the traffic in the tunnel so balky, so maddeningly sticky, has dispersed at last, dissolved on an open paved space among apartment buildings of modest height and billboards and brick row houses and, several blocks distant, fragile-looking glass skyscrapers” (307). The tunnel’s bright mouth grows to swallow Ahmad and his truck and its ghosts; together. Through this “abrupt intrusion” (289), which is loaded with theological overtones, Levy convinces Ahmad to expose the ghosts of his Islamic religion and the threat of the East to the brightening light of Manhattan. Updike’s Arab-American protagonist, who sought to disrupt the interracial space of America, must submit to the final securitization of Western space. Only once Levy persuades Ahmad to quit the mission and therefore thoroughly colonizes this Eastern space, can Levy “welcome [Ahmad] to the Big Apple” (308). Thus, Ahmad finally enters the ultimate Western space, which “could be a nameless spot in Northern New Jersey; only the silhouette, dead ahead, of the Empire State Building, once again the tallest building in New York, signifies otherwise” (307), but only once he leaves the Eastern space behind.

The first sentence of the novel reads: “*Devils*, Ahmad thinks. *These devils seek to take away my God*” (3 italics Updike). The last sentence will be an echo: “*these devils... have taken away my God*” (310 italics Updike). This sounds decisive, but in both cases, Ahmad shows himself to be alienated and locked into binary thinking between his religious ideology and the secular community around him. In other words, the two sentences indicate resistance versus resignation. Ending with the same line it begins with, the novel plays with the idea of a circle. In allegorical terms, Levy represents “reason” and Ahmad represents “faith”. It is no coincidence that when the time comes for Ahmad to carry out his terrorist mission, Levy ends up sitting next to him in the

truck. As the end of the novel shows, Updike gives predominance for “reason” over “faith”. Yet the variation of the tense from past in the first to the present in the second is crucial. The first sentence represents Ahmad's struggle to preserve his faith in the face of what he perceives as a rear universal secularism whereas the second seems to indicate his capitulation to American godlessness.

Terrorist also includes the dialect of Orientalism as famously exposed by Edward Said who decries a series of tendentious dogmas:

One is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a “classical” Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third dogma is that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically “objective.” A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared or to be controlled (300-301).

It may be stated here that Said has contested both Huntington’s and Lewis’s thesis on the “clash of civilizations”. He argues that “neither Huntington nor Lewis has much time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization, or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture, or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagogy and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization” (2). Although America constitutes a multicultural melting pot, the rhetoric of the threatening East persists in many parts of Updike’s novel.

Not only Updike’s *Terrorist* reluctantly allows for difference and interracial sex but still guards against Islamic religion. From the opening pages of the novel, the narrator conveys the idea that Ahmad cannot assimilate into the American society because he constantly compares the

American secular thinking with that of Islam. Separating himself from the community is perceived by Ahmad as a necessity to protect his faith in the existence of God from competing scientific truths which he believes: “but the values they believe in are Godless: biology and chemistry and physics” (4). He tells Levy that Shaikh Rashid informed him that “the college track exposed me [him] to corrupting influences—bad philosophy and bad literature” (38). It is significant to note that the narrative abounds with phrases describing Ahmad's antipathy towards all Americans at large. For instance, the readers are told that Ahmad contrasts himself to the “weak Christians, and non-observant Jews” around him who are “unclean” (3), and “infidels” (4). Ahmad also regards female students as “little whores” (17). In Ahmad's eyes, all these Christians and Jews “lack true faith” (3) and are “wanton and self-indulgent” (4). Thus, it becomes clear to the reader from an early stage of the narrative that Ahmad holds aversion and scorn for Americans only because they are non-Muslims. Being the upshot of miscegenation is but one of the ways in which Ahmad is ‘mixed,’ for he is “the product of a red-haired American mother, Irish by ancestry, and an Egyptian exchange student whose ancestors had been baked since the time of the Pharaohs in the muddy rice and flax fields of the overflowing Nile. The complexion of the offspring of this mixed marriage could be described as dun, a low-luster shade lighter than beige ...” (13). James Wood, mocking this depiction of Ahmad, maintains that “this lofty genealogy is an extraordinary example of airy Orientalism, which, because the sentence combines “baking” and “mud”, clumsily manages to imply that the ancestors were somehow baked in mud” (2). Thus, Updike's *Terrorist*, it may be argued, engages in fictional profiling, a fictional profiling that is also racial. What is fundamental here, then, is precisely the slippage between ethnicity and race, between visible racial difference and alien cultural practice. It is this slippage which haunts American culture; and which has resurfaced with a vengeance after 9/11, tipping the scale, as Updike's novel illustrates, to the racial side of alien classification. Kristiaan Versluys argues that “the novel may not achieve the

examination of the psychological sources of resentment produced by the classic fictional descriptions of terrorism, but it contains an imaginative assessment of what it is in American society that might inspire disgust (to the point of violent revolt) and what it is that inspires loyalty and admiration”. In his view, the novel succeeds in “making terrorism plausible as a form of societal commitment, and at the same time it condemns terrorism as a horror and an outrage. Most strikingly of all, if the imagined terrorist abandons his intentions out of respect for the “Other”, that gesture is reciprocated by the author, who makes good his self-avowed intention to say something from the standpoint of a terrorist” (172-173).

Conclusion:

In *Terrorist*, readers come to see the world through the eyes of a young Arab American in the wake of 9/11. As depicted by Updike, Ahmad mistrusts everyone around him – even, in some measure, those share his faith. In his loneliness and seclusion, he finds submission to God (the literal meaning of “Islam”) difficult to reconcile with the American cultural dominance as experienced in high school and at home. He knows few Muslims but the one with whom he consorts most fervently, the imam, is hardly a true spiritualist model. As a surrogate father, he is a disaster. Ahmad embraces Islam, but there is no *ummah* to embrace him, no community of believers. His feeling of alienation stayed with him up to the end of the novel. One might wonder how Ahmad became so attached to his slender Muslim heritage rather than to his much stronger Irish Catholic one? *Terrorist* offers no clear-cut answers, but we see readily enough the proclivity to idealize the absent father and his different creed.

Though Updike constructs a sympathetic character, who is meant to draw the critical attention to the making of a home-grown terrorist and the West's assumptions about the East, *Terrorist* quite blatantly demonizes the East at large. As the narrative shows, the author utilizes an Egyptian American protagonist who is the outcome of an interracial marriage. In this way,

Updike realizes the threat of interracial marriages which he condemns throughout the novel, despite its importance as a sign of cross-cultural fertilization. Yet while Updike's novel is critical of the West, many anxieties support his narrative. *Terrorist* already presumes a multicultural America, but Ahmad and the East still represent the threatening penetration and potential destruction of Western values and civilization. Hence, Updike's novel reveals the deeply engrained territorial concerns that surround American conceptions of the East, even in the wake of globalization and after the aftermath of 9/11 and the war on terror that follows. In other words, the novel deliberately blurs the boundaries between the "Self" and the 'Other' by presenting an American boy, naive and sympathetic, as the source of Islamic violence.

Besides, Updike, in a way, falls into the contemporary trap laid by the Huntington thesis and exploits the clichés propagated by media outlets. Despite Updike's gifted way with words, clichés and stereotypes at times stifle the novel. As the title suggests, Updike's portrayal of Arab-Americans involves stereotypes that border on racism. In *Terrorist*, candid about the social tensions and racial hatred fostered by 9/11, Updike depicts mainstream white America as self-absorbed, depressed, and fearful of the Muslim "Other". American Muslims are depicted in an ambivalent light and are in the end doomed on account of their bigotry and fanaticism for their ideological beliefs. This type of binary oppositions between whatever Eastern and whatever Western will definitely lead to threats to the mutual understanding between the East and West or between what is Islamic and what is un-Islamic. Contemplating the aftermath of 9/11, Updike strives to avoid to the dominant Orientalist thinking in which the intercultural as well as interreligious differences take dominance over mutual understandings and common grounds. In other words, the novel goes a long way towards exploring, and potentially helping bridge, the ever-growing gap of misunderstanding between East and West.

Also, Updike's *Terrorist*, which pivots on the revived discourses about Samuel Huntington's

"clash of civilizations" arguments, features characters whose ethnic, religious and cultural differences are clear-cut and irreconcilable. The Arab American characters have been variously and paradoxically stereotyped. They have been reduced to mere stereotypes and opposites to their western counterparts. These characters include the dangerous and dishonest imam, the naive young Muslim, the irresponsible husband and the treacherous and unfaithful friend. The background knowledge the American readers already have developed about Islam, especially after the tragic events of 9/11, will negatively affect the reception of Islam and Arab characters in *Terrorist*. As a result, the narrator's choice of words that show Ahmad's attitude towards the American society as malevolent and contemptuous will provoke resentment and anger in the American reader. It is important to stress that all of Ahmad's feelings mentioned in *Terrorist* are rendered by the third person narrative technique to share the perceptions of readers. Thus, Updike makes Ahmad and the other Muslim characters act aggressively not only against the Americans around them, but against the American community as a whole through their adoption of jihadist ideology and their intent on destroying innocent American citizens.

To sum up, the novel does not explain why Ahmad blindly follows the imam's directives and seems to have no will of his own or point out why this supposedly gentle soul gives no thought at all to the hundreds — perhaps thousands — of people he would kill were his suicide mission to succeed. The novelist almost states that Ahmad disapproves of America because his religion incites him to do so. But Islam is hardly alone in condemning godless materialism. The kind of rage that leads people to commit violence against one another is a complex brew of chemicals mixing inside human beings burnt by real life. To be plausible, a book about terrorism must deal with the identity of psychic desperation, the loss of dignity, the politics of marginalization, and the struggle for power and manhood.

Finally, in spite all its flaws, *Terrorist* remains an impressive attempt to understand the worldview of a modern would-be Islamist terrorist, avoiding

caricature and recognizing complexity. Without condoning terrorism and without any apologetics for those who commit it, *Terrorist* invites readers to see and look at the world through eyes other than their own. And this is surely part of the function of imaginative literature. Updike is scarcely the first author to draw attention to the fact that terrorism is not a simple, direct response to, or result of, social injustice, poverty, or any

other objectively discernible human ill. The novel's title is literal, but its aftertaste is the profound sense that we all terrorize each other in strange, quotidian ways. We do so with our cynicism, infidelity, and bitterness, with our bullying, the betrayal of our ideals, with our weakness and disgusting habits, our greed and licentiousness. We do so, in short, by our immersion in and submission to materialism.

NOTES

¹ Qur'an, Surah *Ar-Rahman* [All-Merciful], 55: 72.

² In his pursuit of authenticity, Updike immersed himself in studying the Qur'an, acquainting himself with Jihadist idiom and metaphor, dazzling the readers in his novel with italicized terms like *kafir*, *buraq*, *jahiliyah*, *shari'a*, *ummah*, and the rest of it. These terms, and others, show a well-researched novel.

³ Surah Qāf (*The Letter Qaf*), 50: 16.

⁴ Samuel Huntington (1927 –2008) was the first to popularize this simplistic worldview in an article he published on 1993. Huntington, who had little exposure to Islam and the Middle East, presented a global picture of seven or eight major civilizations, of which Islam was one, and concluded that “the dominating source of conflict will be cultural”. Huntington later expanded his thesis in a 1996 book entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Bernard Lewis (1916-), though holding a similar view of enraged Muslims versus the enlightened, successful West, presented a somewhat more nuanced analysis than Huntington's. The old dualisms were revived. For more on this theory, see Huntington's “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs, the Council of Foreign Relations*, 1993, and Lewis's “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990.

⁵ Qur'an, Surah *Al-Waq'eah* [The Event], 56:57-59].

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