

Terrorism as a Gendered Familial Psychodrama in John Updike's *Terrorist*

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Abstract

John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) tackles the fraught theme of the 'homegrown' Muslim American terrorist. The novel's suspenseful plot, culminating in the young terrorist's capitulation following the intervention of his high school counsellor, contains logical inconsistencies that appear to lessen believability or to demand the suspension of disbelief for the sake of a certain breach of realism, which may echo the would-be terrorist's own sense of his environment. This paper explores the idea that logical and thematic inconsistencies in the novel, including deep ambivalence in the depiction of the female characters, are devices deliberately put in place to highlight a gendered psychodrama and construct a strongly patriarchal worldview, both of which offer near-experiential insight into the young terrorist's own perspective.

Key Words: Updike, *Terrorist*, Muslim, American, psychodrama.

John Updike, throughout his long and acclaimed career spanning over half a century, often waded willingly into controversy, grappling with moral questions among a quintessentially American populace of characters. In the context of his life's corpus, *Terrorist* (2006) is in some ways an aberration, as it seeks to represent the viewpoint of a self-identified Muslim radical and would-be terrorist rather than Updike's usual American protagonist. However, the character in question, a young man named Ahmad Mulloy (who is soon to adopt the surname of his father, Ashwamy, which he favours over that of the Irish-American mother who raised him) is also undeniably American; through his mixed ethnicity and upbringing by a freethinking single mother, he may even be regarded as typical of the generation who came of age in the new millennium. However, with regard to his depiction Ahmad's chosen identity, that of a radicalized Muslim, Updike's work has been called "essentialist", "clichéd" and a "caricature" (Krierbernegg 2011, p. 219). Such statements may be justified insofar as Ahmad's religious views, as presented, are simplistic and unconvincing, while his planned terrorist action is horrifying. In the wake of 9/11, both are clearly likely to inflame; much sympathy for this young character is not to be expected among Updike's predominantly American readership. At the same time, I would argue that Updike makes an attempt to radically humanize the Muslim terrorist by making his cause and actions explicable on the grounds of psychology. Specifically, this is a story of a young man who has grown up with an absent father, and whose subsequent search for a father figure leads him into a tunnel with an armed truck, ready to detonate it in rush-hour traffic — however, the crisis is averted through an intervention by perhaps the only

possible party, another father figure, an elderly (secular) Jewish school counsellor. Despite the psychological realism with which much of the story unfolds, I would argue, further, that aberrations from realism in the novel are intentional and support the story's sometimes improbable plot and characterizations.

Such is the reader's engagement in the psychodrama that powers the action that one has a sense of relief as soon as the counsellor, Jack Levy (in an act of logical improbability) intercepts and enters the truck with Ahmad. Given this culminating scene and its outcome, there can be little doubt that both Ahmad's fall and his ultimate reconciliation, having driven through the tunnel without detonating the explosives, are primarily and fundamentally enmeshed in a drama of the family, and as such, universal. In this way, as well as through his cast of carefully selected multicultural characters, Updike strives and perhaps succeeds in creating a sense of understanding and sympathy for the young would-be terrorist.

It is odd and certainly worth discussing that the plot itself is so full of obvious logical failures and improbable coincidences that stretch the reader's credulity. For example, as noted by Christopher Hitchens in a scornful review of the novel for *The Atlantic*, it is highly unlikely that the desire of a "green young Islamist[']s" fervent desire to learn to drive a truck in "immediate post-9/11 New Jersey" would "set off no bells at all" (Hitchens 2006). It is even less likely that, once apprised of the terrorist plot, the government would allow the aging school counsellor Jack Levy to be the sole interceptor of Ahmad's truck on its path to destruction! (Would not traffic going into the tunnel have been diverted, at the very least?) In a writer of Updike's standing and reputation, these narrative choices may serve a deliberate function. Perhaps Updike's reputation as a realist writer blinds critics to literary aims and techniques in his work that transcend realism. However, there are several books in his body of work that consciously employ magical realism — these include *Brazil*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, and the only novel written after *Terrorist*, *The Widows of Eastwick*. The latter, his last, is a sequel to *Witches*, written almost three decades earlier, and ought to ensure Updike's reputation as a writer who willingly and often blends realism with elements that veer from it. In his book *Updike: America's Man of Letters*, Pritchard describes him as a novelist

who for twenty years might have been content to rest on realist laurels... [he now comes] across as a dazzler and showman, as Nabokovian illusionist, in a more radical way than he had hitherto demonstrated (Pritchard 195 cited by Batchelor 145).

Terrorist may lack the obvious 'magical' elements of *Witches* or *Brazil*, but literary elements are certainly used with great skill to manipulate and selectively alter readers' responses. Batchelor notes that the novel was underappreciated by critics, but contains sophisticated literary technique – for example, the insidious qualities of the character Beth, whose 'absurd' persona is cultivated as a type of illusion (Batchelor 142). Perhaps the absurd elements of plot, mentioned above, carry a similar, insidious function. Their veering from overt realism has the same function that magic realism would – they uncover and direct our attention to underlying psychological realism and powerful symbolism.

An interview with Updike reveals that it was the author's own slight phobia of tunnels and his image of the Lincoln Tunnel being hit by a terrorist attack that inspired the core of this narrative (McGrath 2006). The improbable selection of Jack Levy as the hero of the piece must likewise be a deliberate, though perhaps less personal, choice - an instance in which the plot adjusts to course, which, of course, it is the privilege of any author to devise. The choice appears, however, in some sense contrived and even manipulative, as it herds the reader toward a certain, strongly patriarchal worldview. In this context, of course, it is the perfect intervention - there is no doubt in the reader's mind that Jack Levy is the only person who could have defused the situation, from the point of view of the psychological reality that permeates the story. Legend-like, the conclusion becomes psychologically inevitable despite being narratively improbable. The air of unreality or "surreality" is also destabilizing, setting one free from the regular coding of one's reality. How could Jack Levy be here? How could the ordinary and catastrophically extraordinary pass so closely by each other? Indeed, it is a result of this almost-here of destabilization that stems the feeling that, even at the conclusion of the novel, crisis averted, we are not altogether safe. Could Ahmad change his mind at the next busy intersection? The armoured truck has not yet been brought to safety, though the safety switch has been flipped. It continues its way through the streets of New York as the narrative ends.

The 'homegrown' terrorist

What implicit and explicit messages is Updike attempting to convey with this rather odd story? Two primary themes appear to be prevalent. First is the notion of the homegrown terrorist, which Ahmad, after all, is. This notion is perhaps particularly frightening to the American citizen, as it deprives him of the option of casting the terrorist as an unequivocal other. Indeed, the story is rather prescient of actual events; as of this writing, it was only just over a year ago that America was rocked by the Boston Marathon bombing, perpetrated by just such 'homegrown' (albeit immigrant) terrorists, and the nation was forced to ponder the difficult question of what specific constellation of factors radicalized them.

Perhaps turning our attention toward homegrown terrorists is a natural intellectual progression, similar to that which the west was forced into in the aftermath of WWII, realizing that the atrocities committed in Europe were attributable to something more universal than the culture or nationalism of Germany (Turner n.d.):

In the United States, where it had perhaps been common to dismiss the Holocaust as the actions of "others", meaning not your everyday American (or, for that matter *any* American, the 1960s was going to bring a new consciousness... or at least some level of awareness that dismissing the actions of the Nazis as inexplicable except by assuming that Germany was a land of monsters who were fundamentally different from the majority of people elsewhere was too easy. (Turner 96)

The British, too, came to the hangover effect of introspection following World War

II - though somewhat earlier. It is in this vein that William Golding wrote *Lord of the Flies*, an updated version and in some ways a homage to Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*. Whereas in the latter, a group of stranded boys face evil generated from an external, dehumanized 'other', a group of native 'heathens' and 'savages', in Golding's version, it must be admitted that the evil comes from the British schoolboys themselves. There *is* no 'other', but a mirror.

If we accept the premise that evil potentially resides in any of us, our attention turns naturally to factors that precipitate it. Andrea Kuszewski (2011) argues that there is, in life as well as in literature, a fine line between sociopathy and heroism. In fact, her article cites evidence that sociopath's and 'x-altruists', those most willing to put their own interests aside for the sake of society, share a number of traits. The principal difference seems to be that the x-altruist can practice flexible detachment, emotionally detaching from a situation temporarily to accomplish a task, while for a sociopath, such detachment is both permanent and beyond his control (Kuszewski 2011, p. 214). In fact, Ahmad fits the description of an x-altruist quite well - albeit a misguided one - as his detachment from the others implicated in his situation is temporary, and this turns out to be a saving grace. Roy Bowmeister (2006) posits that it is, perhaps, threatened egoism rather than low self-esteem, as is often assumed by parents, teachers, educators and even psychologists, that tends to make an individual violent. Bowmeister cites studies which demonstrate this - assessing, for example, the level of egotism among violent offenders. It is, then, the loss of a somewhat inflated sense of self, or a perceived threat to that sense, that may make individuals react violently. As the persona of the terrorist, as conceived by Updike, appears to co-exist with a rigid and distinctive sense of self - for example, Ahmad's formal and stilted diction (although he has been raised in the United States), his self-presentation, and his inflexible set of beliefs - it might be expected that a threat to aspects of his self-conceived persona may catapult Ahmad into actual violence. In fact, such a threat seems to do the opposite. After his encounter with Joryleen, and after he is convinced to give up on his mission - both seemingly huge alterations or challenges to his sense of himself - Ahmad reacts mildly, as though deflated rather than provoked.

Absent fathers - the psychodrama

The focus on homegrown terrorism is perhaps another such introspective look, surely an evolution past the external laying of blame, but still potentially objectifying. As soon as one explores the possibility of harm coming from within, there is a drive to encapsulate and understand the reason behind it, much as an explosives expert would examine a bomb in order to safely diffuse it. It is this sort of exercise that Updike appears to be engaged in as he tells us the story of Ahmad, an almost forensic account of what has gone wrong and a chilling admonishment that this wrong can have devastating effects. And that examination, not surprisingly, focuses on psychological truths and the interaction that takes place within the family and community. It is not surprising because it is, after all, the natural (for western society) track to take when dealing with wayward youth and juvenile

offenders. Family history and issues related to self-esteem are deemed, in the literature surrounding youth and crime, to be absolutely essential to our understanding of the dynamic. In the popular book *Hold onto Your Kids: Why Parents Matter*, prominent child psychologist Gordon Neufeld states that it is the parents' duty to maintain, at all costs, a predominant connection with their children rather than leaving them to the vagaries of society (Neufeld and Mate 2004). The latter tendency is tantamount to abandonment even in cases when the parents are both in the home. Of course, when a parent, specifically, in many cases, the father, is absent from the home, problems are amplified. The book *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons* encapsulates the dynamic well, linking the absence of the father in the home as a precursor of violence and crime, as well as personal dysfunction and low self-worth, particularly among boys, the reason being that identity formation is more complicated in males than in females (Corneau 1991). Camille Paglia explained why this might be so: "A woman simply is, but a man must become. Masculinity is risky and elusive. It is achieved by a revolt from women, and it is confirmed only by other men" (cited by Kendall 2001 p. 315). A great variety of behavioural problems are associated with growing up without a father, including the development of a "swaggering, intimidating persona in an attempt to disguise their underlying fears, resentments, anxieties and unhappiness" (Kruk). As a direct result, delinquency and youth crime rise with fatherlessness, with eighty five percent of youth in prison having an absent father (Kruk). It has long been observed, furthermore, that children without fathers "gravitate toward just about any man around – uncle, father, athletic coach, teacher, etc., trying to satisfy and explore a fantasized relationship with their father that they are unable to have due to his absence" (Herzig 1982 cited by Wineburgh 256). These and similar observations are buoyed by psychological studies.

Updike plays upon such a well-known psychological dynamic in this book - indeed, one might even say that he exploits it, because this dynamic, the narrative of which is so familiar to a western readership, lends an air of tragic inevitability to the events in the novel. Ahmad is a young man without a father in the home, and whose mother is not particularly attentive. We quickly learn, however, that he has, from the age of eleven, acquired an alternative father figure, and knowing the rudiments of family psychology we immediately understand that power that such a figure would have. Shaikh Rashid, Ahmad's teacher, is a sort of nightmarish figure, both draconian and radicalized. Embodying the 'other' - being a repository of values incompatible with the western society - he has, apparently with great ease, removed Ahmad from the status and won him over, so that the boy's superego is seemingly composed for the most part of Rashid's teachings. These become the standard Ahmad holds up for himself, and what he most closely identifies with. Understanding the effects of an absent father, as readers, we are quickly convinced of the powerful influence that Shaikh Rashid must have over Ahmad - moreover, as readers well versed in the rudiments of popular psychology, we can wholly rationalize the reason behind it.

The stage is thus set to cast Jack Levy as an improbable hero. The psychological

justification for the choice is compelling - Jack is, like Shaikh Rashid, a potential alternate father figure. The fact that he enters into a relationship with Ahmad's mother - a diversion that seems to have little other narrative purpose - strengthens this association. Jack is, of course, a fallible character in multiple ways. He is himself, nihilistic and disaffected. In his own way, he is an outsider to mainstream society given his Jewish background, but he is also an outsider to his faith and ethnic background because he is not a practicing Jew. One might say that Jack Levy has lost his way as much as Ahmad has, but in the drama that builds throughout the novel and unfolds in the final scenes, none of this matters. As a school counsellor with an existing relationship with Ahmad, he is able, in some way, to heal the deficiency that has existed in the young man's life. The result is that Ahmad quickly becomes socialized - or rather, the socialization that was always latent within him asserts itself. He feels compassion for a child in the car ahead of him, and chooses not to detonate his explosives.

The importance that Updike places on this dynamic is utmost. As mentioned, we as readers are asked to suspend our incredulity in order for this scene to unfold - the justification presumably being that the psychological truth and power of the scene eclipses any of the logical deficiencies. Indeed, it is as though those details are sketched in to surround the central drama, lending an air of unreality to the plot and the scene.

Role of the feminine

It is abundantly clear, then, that the controlling dynamic in *Terrorist* is fundamentally and perhaps necessarily male-centred. What, then, are we to make of the presence of three powerful and vivid female characters, whose strengths are highlighted but who ultimately are impotent in affecting even the smallest aspect of the story's trajectory and outcome? Indeed, their ambiguity rivals that of the main characters in *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Widows of Eastwick*, which sparked controversy among critics over whether the portrayal of the female characters is fundamentally empowering or misogynistic.

In *Terrorist*, the portraits of the female characters are so striking as to suggest that a feminist analysis may take us furthest in understanding the overt and hidden allegiances and negotiations of power in this novel. Despite the strength of the depictions of the three principal female characters, Joryleen, Terry and Beth, they are uniformly degraded or ineffectual - in most cases, both. The wisdom and power that each holds can exist, in this novel, only amid subjugation and compromise.

Beth Levy, Jack's wife, is an appropriate start to this analysis of the female, perhaps because her description is so strongly negative, while the woman herself, if we are to regard her as such, is not necessarily so. She is the symbol of American degeneration and excess. The stereotypical fat American in a Lazy-boy chair, watching soap operas, and almost unable to get up and fetch the snacks she relies upon. She appears to be the essence of Jack's lack of success and the disappointment and degeneration that he feels in his own life. Jack, indeed, finds her "oppressively fat" and her presence oppressive in general (37).

At the same time, however, Beth has a degree of agency. She is employed at the library and, Jack admits, more skilled than he in using computers. Moreover, Beth is, by the end of the story, engaged in self-improvement, demonstrating the power and possibility of self-regeneration.

It is interesting that Beth's primary weakness is her obesity; after all, we view her foremost through Jack's eyes, and her weight makes her a disappointment to him and drives him toward despair. Elsewhere, it is the characteristic clearly calculated to make her a figure of fun or derision in the eyes of the reader, as she reclines in her chair and contemplates the long walk to the kitchen for more snacks. What, then, are we to make of the fact that plumpness is a characteristic shared by all three female characters, but seemingly a detriment only to Beth? For Joryleen, a girl of seventeen or eighteen, the abundance of flesh makes her nubile and desirable. Her "coco brown roundness" appeals to Ahmad in the first scene (8). Meanwhile, Ahmad's mother, Terry, described in terms of her similarity in body type to Beth, has a strong sexual appeal for Jack, part of which seems to be composed of nostalgia for a younger version of his wife. Despite the present appeal, however, the slide into debasement and degeneration seems already inevitable:

The ankles are bony and lean, considering the soft heft of the rest of her. Beth's weight has had twenty more years than this woman's to settle low, drooping over her shoes and taking all the anatomy out of her ass. (84)

Aspects of the feminine in classical Western mythology are often thought to be embodied in three faces of the female divine, the 'triple goddess', the Maiden, Mother and Crone (Jung and Kerenyi 1949; Graves cited by Clifton et al 2004). The physical and other similarities between Joryleen, Terry and Beth render them adequate representations of these archetypes, while raising cogent questions about them and the stereotypes surrounding them. For example, Joryleen, while young, is no maiden - although, in fact, with her dual role as choir girl and prostitute, she does embody the maiden/whore dichotomy. Terry, likewise, while undeniably a mother, is an eminently fallible one, putting her own interests above those of her child. But does she have motherly wisdom after all? The suggestion exists that it is her very philosophy of motherhood that has propelled Ahmad into the role of a terrorist. For that matter, Beth, as the crone (embodiment of wisdom) is foolish and lacks self-awareness - until she abruptly gains it. These three faces of the feminine as presented here are fallible, odd, yet also oddly powerful, adhering to the archetypes enough to lend them gravitas, but almost systematically discredited.

Like Terry and Beth, the character Joryleen is puzzling except where she is portrayed in unambiguously negative terms. *In* those terms, she is the archetype of the fallen woman, or perhaps the whore with a heart of gold. She is a girl who showed promise, character and intelligence while in high school, but who all too quickly becomes degraded through poverty and negative social influence. Her precipitous fall, from choir girl to prostitute in a matter of months, strains credulity - and so, even more, does the extraordinary coincidence of her being the very prostitute that is procured for Ahmad. These lapses in verisimilitude and possible

reasons for them have already been dealt with, and need not be considered here. Rather, we will consider the fact that Joryleen, like Beth, is likeable and positive as a character but is nevertheless depicted as a veritable symbol of the collapse of society and its values. The fall of a young girl into prostitution in order to provide money to a worthless boyfriend is a common trope and often, doubtless, a social reality. When it happens, we despair of the lack of values and lack of support for youth that have brought about such degraded circumstances. Joryleen seems symbolic of this ugly aspect of society and as such, we can envision no positive future for her. In fact, again symbolically as well as personally, this is a social ill that Ahmad seeks to remedy, in part by giving his monetary legacy to Joryleen to purchase a brighter future for her with his action.

Aside from being a symbol of degradation, however, Joryleen is close to admirable. She is intelligent, forthright, talented and compassionate. Attracted to Ahmad while the pair are still in high school, she asks him critical and challenging questions which succeed in engaging him - perhaps, even, in making him question his one-sided views of life. She invites him to traverse social boundaries, which he does, by attending her church and listening to her sing, as well as walking with her through her neighbourhood. It is an education for Ahmad of the America that lies beyond his school, home and mosque, or it would be, if the association were not so short-lived. The impression we garner, therefore, is that the time with Joryleen is a missed opportunity for Ahmad to gain a broader perspective and compassion, which he would undoubtedly have benefited from almost immeasurably. For this to be true, we have to perceive Joryleen as a positive influence, a character singularly capable of bringing him past the point of crisis.

The plot of the novel does not allow for this, however, and indeed giddily jeopardizes any benefit Ahmad could have gained from an association with Joryleen by re-casting her as a prostitute, living proof, as it were, of Ahmad's early paranoid and judgmental rumination on the sexual temptation and rampant immorality represented by American girls. She has become his worst nightmare, in other words.

Given the situation, however, the interaction between Ahmad and Joryleen is oddly benign in that scene, perhaps due to the affinity between the two, or, again, Joryleen's compassionate nature. While using language designed to repel (including the unattractive slang term 'scumbag' when talking about a condom, a term that is archaic, its rare remaining references dating back to the 1930s. Why resurrect this term? Is it so that the reader is in some sense reminded to recoil from Joryleen and the entire scene?) Even so, the scene is not repugnant. In an essentially friendly fashion, Ahmad and Joryleen are able to arrive at a compromise, so that she can do what she has been paid to do, and he can preserve his virginity and therefore some semblance of his virtue, even referencing the Muslim Holy Book while doing so, and voicing a philosophical perspective well beyond her years:

"Just let me take him into my mouth", she says. "That's no sin in the old Koran. That's just natural affection. We're made for it, Ahmad. And we won't stay made forever. We get old, we get sick" (221)

While the reader might assume that Ahmad would either react with repugnance to this proposition or abandon his moral stance in the face of such acute temptation, he does neither. Here, again, the ability of Joryleen to bring about near-changes in Ahmad, to invite him to violate his absolutist tendencies without much resistance or negative after-effects, is impressive. The intention is clearly to depict a woman who would, potentially, be able to help Ahmad come to an understanding about the world and his place within it - and, equally, the narrative intention is to limit the power woman by casting her in a social role that is unmistakably degraded, fodder for Ahmad's hatred of the morally bankrupt America.

Ahmad's mother, Terry, is perhaps the most ambiguous character because of the real autonomy and control that she appears to have, traits which are, nevertheless, subsumed in her seeming near-lethal ineffectuality as a mother. The meaning of the contradiction is, of course, clear enough when considered within the context of the other female characters. Like Beth and Joryleen, Terry is a powerful character whose power is sharply limited by this narrative.

Interestingly, the first description we have of Terry emphasizes her limitations. This comes, of course, from Ahmad, who appears to disparage his mother's lack of ambition, stating:

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)

As though to demonstrate the fallibility of that viewpoint, however, Terry herself has the opportunity to speak on the subject, and has something different to say; it is evident she has made the choice consciously, in the interest of pursuing her art. She adopts the shorter derivation of her name, Teresa, knowing that it will create ambivalence regarding her gender for potential art buyers, and that male artists are "always bigger" than female artists (86). She is, in other words, a woman actively making choices, and empowering others to make them as well. Even her paintings are not interpreted by the artist, so that the viewer himself may have the freedom to do so. Terry is independent and realistic, prioritizing her painting but under no delusion that she will achieve greatness by selling paintings, taking lovers but not looking to them to provide for her. She is subversive and rare, a woman who is free to make clear choices. Even Ahmad, at the end, acknowledges her competence in being about to look after herself, stating "My mother - she has always supported herself" (235).

It is clear, indeed, that she has always been able to do so, even as a single mother abandoned by her husband. It may even be argued that the fact that Terry has been able to impose her surname on Ahmad (although he plans to change it when he comes of age) is symbolic of her broader social agency, as the carrying on of the name to future generations has traditionally been the province of the male. For Ahmad to bear his mother's name is clearly a challenge for him; symbolically, he has been branded or claimed by his mother, in opposition to his own wishes and

patriarchal tendencies.

As a nursing assistant, Terry perhaps embodies traditional roles and meets patriarchal expectations by working in a 'female' profession. At the same time, however, her profession demonstrates qualities of compassion, as well as her competence within a set professional protocol. Moreover, as mentioned, the job provides both intrinsic satisfaction and the freedom that she requires. She exercises the agency and control over her life to procure the employment that she wants, regardless of societal expectations. Terry explains:

I'm a nurse's aid, I never really wanted to be a nurse... nurse's aides do what nurses used to do; I like hands-on, deal with people right down there at the level of their real needs. painting is my *passion*. (92)

As a mother, Terry appears to balance supportiveness with a type of permissiveness. She wears a headscarf to Ahmad's graduation at his request, out of concern for his sensibilities and in response to his direct request. (Ironically, as noted by Marandi and Tari, Jack Levy finds Terry's headscarf and its connotation of submission "stirring", activating his sexual interest). On the other hand, Terry's philosophy on parenting, as she explains it to Jack Levy, is chilling, as it naturally leads to the reader to wonder whether it has created a void that has led to Ahmad's terrorist affiliations. Yet, beyond the dramatic irony of her statements, it is difficult to fault her on her philosophy, as she appears neither controlling nor neglectful, navigating the twin pitfalls of mothering in the modern era. Terry appears unperturbed by the time her son spends at the mosque, just as she is not troubled by his choosing to become a truck driver rather than striving for higher education following high school. She explains to Jack:

Don't you think people find their potential, like water finds its level? I've never believed in people being pots of clay, to be shaped. The shape is inside, from the start. I've treated Ahmad as an equal since he was eleven, when he began to be so religious. I encouraged him at it ... if Ahmad had gone the other way, if he had turned against the God racket all the way, as I did, I would have let that happen too. (90 - 91)

In her professional life, her parenting, even her embracing and strategic distancing from Jack Levy, Terry is nothing but competent, realistic and reasonable. Yet, within the novel, with its leitmotif of radical dysfunction, she skates dangerously on the edge of disaster, and, indeed, would have done nothing to avert it. As the reader knows but Terry herself does not, she is soon to become infamous as the mother of a terrorist; just as she is soon to be bereaved through the loss of her son and only family. Knowing this as we do, it is impossible to see Terry as anything other than a woman on the brink of disaster, and it takes an unemotional second look to conclude that this is through none of her own fault, and that her own opinions and sensibilities may, after all, be eminently competent.

The importance of patriarchy: the 'terrorist' worldview

This entire direction of investigation leads us to an important paradox: While

Updike is more than willing to depict and expand upon the strength of the female characters in this novel, ultimately that power is rejection, and only the intervention of a fallible father figure averts disaster. Again, we must question this narrative (and perhaps philosophical) choice.

I would submit that there are two possible explanations. More specifically, the rejection of the salvation afforded by the feminine is either Ahmad's judgment and worldview, or Updike's own. Unfortunately, the narrative and its telling leave us few clues as to which of these interpretations to favour. If the latter, is the author demonstrating that even the strongest female characters have a fundamental vulnerability and inadequacy, that even the most fallible, anti-heroic male can easily provide what the strongest female cannot? Is Updike's own worldview, judging by this novel, at least, fundamentally misogynistic?

Or is the author, rather, steeping the narrative in his own representation of *Ahmad's* worldview and bias? After all, for Ahmad, an upbringing by his mother alone was inadequate. By extension, does this indicate that the feminine influence in general is inadequate to fix what ails Ahmad? By extension, therefore, are all positive female influences in the novel, no matter how compelling, by necessity neutralized? Is this inability to draw strength from those closest to him (potentially, Joryleen and Terry) a symptom of Ahmad's radicalized worldview? In other words, is it Ahmad, only, who is misogynistic, and are seemingly misogynistic messages in the novel present merely because the vortex of his worldview warps the entire narrative? One point in favour of this interpretation is the subtle tendency away from realism, described previously. The worldview of a young man about to die for his faith would indeed be foreshortened, fraught with significance, intensified, and therefore probably surreal. The degeneration of the female characters, therefore, may be a symptom of the storyteller's entering into Ahmad's world and replicating what is in his mind. A strict realism, in that case, would no longer matter. The boy's failure to take comfort from his mother and the young man's embrace of a strictly patriarchal worldview would preclude any ultimately positive or adequate view of the feminine.

This latter interpretation would explain, also, why Jack Levy is able to step into his unlikely heroic role. *Any* male, even a highly fallible one, would have a powerful influence on the boy if he fills a gaping deficiency - even if, in the process of transferring his allegiance and obeisance to a mortal and therefore fallible male figure, Ahmad loses or renounces his sense of God. It is only in this bittersweet ending that Updike shows us how much has been lost by Ahmad's capitulation, which is nevertheless a necessary loss so that the living world can be gained, and can continue.

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