



Misrepresenting the ‘self’: Critical Discourse Analysis of Ahmad in Updike’s Terrorist

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Abstract: *The present paper investigates Updike’s Terrorist to examine the discursive identity construction of the protagonist of the novel named as Ahmad. It answers the question that how does western stereotypical representation misrepresents Ahmad in Updike’s Terrorist. The context of the novel deals with 9/11 attacks on American soil after which Muslims of the world particularly Pakistani Muslims were stigmatized as terrorists and fundamentalists. Neo-orientalist attitude against Muslims is not a recent fabrication. It has been carried out against them since the arrival of Islam in this world. John Updike, a Jew-American novelist treading the ways of his predecessors, has shown a Muslim character Ahmad becoming a terrorist under the influence of his religious mentor Sheikh Rashid. The subjectification of Ahmad has been explored in the light of Mitchel Foucault’s views on discourse using critical discourse analysis tools propounded by Gee (2011). The findings of the study show that Updike has misrepresented his Muslim character Ahmad as terrorist, anti-social, and a person who hates acquiring modern education.*

Keywords: Terrorist, Ahmad, Misrepresentation, Discourse,
Identity

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Introduction

Ever since the arrival of Islam in the world, various attacks have been made to disfigure Islam and its adherents. Muslims and Islam are constantly under the gaze of the west. They are represented in fiction and non-fiction as terrorists, averse to democracy and modernity, anti-modern barbarians, destroyer of world peace, radical fundamentalists and enemy of human race.

Identity is constructed through language. If we make a careful study of language, we may come to know about the people who are using it and about whom it is being used. A similar view is argued by Derrida (1976) when he says there is nothing outside the text. We use language to convey our thoughts, exchange information but it is also a very powerful tool to know about the speaker's identity, race, social status, class and above all his/her ideology. We can construct and negotiate identity in language and through language. Mitchel Foucault, a French historian, thinker and philosopher, finds meanings in discourse rather than in language. The insight which Foucault has provided through his works provides the researcher a framework through which he can reach the hidden truth of the texts.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 on American soil have been the subject of many fiction writers and a lot of work has been written on the fall of Twin Towers. John Updike is an American novelist, poet and a short story writer. He graduated from Harvard University. Updike is a prolific fiction writer and *Terrorist* was his 22nd novel to emerge on the literary scene. He is also the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for his famous *Rabbit Series*. Updike wrote *Terrorist* in 2006 in response to the socio-political and cultural shifts that occurred in USA after 9/11.

Terrorist has been written in the post 9/11 context. The plot of the novel revolves around a Muslim character Ahmad. Ahmad studies at Central high school in New Jersey. He is a very strict pursuer of Islam who thinks that his faith is threatened by the godless American society. Ahmad is under the spiritual influence of Sheikh Rashid, an Imam at a local mosque. He and Sheikh Rashid often recite Holy Qur'an and discuss with each other important matters related to Jihad, the Straight Path. At Central High School is a guidance counselor, Jack Levy, who tries to stop Ahmad from becoming a terrorist in the novel. Sheikh Rashid instigates Ahmad to quit college and pushes him to learn driving truck. With the passage of time, Sheikh Rashid

by taking help from the verses of the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) succeeds in turning Ahmad to a terrorist for blowing up the Lincoln Tunnel to destroy the non-believers. At the end of the novel, the terrorist plot is hatched and Jack Levy succeeds in averting the looming tragedy by changing Ahmad's mind. The present study is aimed at exploring the key research question in the novel:

How does western stereotypical representation misrepresent the identity of Ahmad in Updike's *Terrorist*?

Review of Literature

The single cataclysmic event of 9/11 affected the lives of millions of Muslims inside and outside of America. The animosity and conflict between Muslims and Non-Muslims gained unprecedented attention after 9/11. After the fall of World Trade Centre, USA reviewed its foreign policy towards Muslims of the world particularly Pakistani Muslims. The clash between the Islam and the rest of the world (especially west) is not a recent one. It dates to the arrival of Islam into the world. History is replete with repeated western onslaughts aimed at disfiguring Islam and Muslims in the eyes of the world by using multiple modern means. Huntington's thesis about *Clash of Civilizations* is very much relevant in this context. Huntington (1996) writes "*the West's universalist pretensions increasingly bring it into conflict with other civilizations, most seriously with Islam and China*" (p. 20). Furthermore, Huntington (1993) views terrorism as a part of conflict between Western World and the Muslim World. Salter (2003) writes that the *clash of civilizations* thesis has become a touchstone for contemporary theorizing about America's role in world politics. The war on terror has reinforced the core arguments of cultural clash, the irreconcilability of *civilizations*, and the need for American leadership. Furthermore, Salter (2003) reiterates that

In his cartography of the new world order, Huntington represents Islamic civilization as youthful, fundamentalist, leaderless and, as such, barbarian. As is evident, this has been adopted wholesale by the Bush administration—even to the extent of naming countries involved in Huntington's Islamic–Confucian alliance as the “axis of evil”. (p. 118)

In post 9/11 Western literary canon, there emerged a lot of critical work on marginalization, misrepresentation, identity construction and stereotyping of Muslims and Islam. The attacks on American soil on 9/11 triggered massive changes in almost all the spheres of life. Be it fiction or non-fiction, print media or electronic media or even the books of the children, we see terrorism everywhere and it is discursively constructing the identity of Muslims and Islam as fundamentalists and terrorists. Thinkers such as Daniel, Said, Ahmed, Sardar, Abbas, Poole, Allen, Bunglawala, and the Runnymede Trust have raised their voice against these western media onslaughts and have written extensively on this topic. In similar fashion scholars such as Philip K. Hitti, Albert Hourani, George Makdisi, Muhsin Mahdi, Syed Hussein Nasar and Fazlur Rahman also have expressed their concerns over misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam.

The present study considers the representation of Muslims and Islam in three genres i.e., cinema, television news media and canonical and popular western English literature.

Cinematic Representation of Muslims

Cinema industry wields great influence over the lives of modern man and it is very popular among every age group. It is widely believed that media represents reality but recent researches show that media *constructs* reality rather than represent it. Cinema has assumed the shape of one of the discursive practices with which we can mold public opinion the way we want. Movies such as *The Sheik* (1921), *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), *The Song of Love* (1923), *A Cafe in Cairo* (1924), *A Son of the Sahara* (1924), *The Desert Bride* (1928), *Black Sunday* (1977), *The Black Stallion* (1979), and *Back to the Future* (1985) deal with Arab characters engaged in killing, looting, blackmailing, bombing and similar inhuman activities. More recently, movies like *Jackass Number Two* (2006) and *The Dictator* (2012) have left no stone unturned in disfiguring the Muslims in the eyes of the world. These are some of the instances out of the large body of movies dealing with the misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam and in a way constructing a negative identity of the Islam and Muslims.

Representation of Muslims in Electronic and Print News Media

Whitaker (2002) while making an analysis of the Muslims and Islam in British press notes that “there are at least four very persistent stereotypes that crop up time and again in different articles. These tell us that Muslims are intolerant, misogynistic, violent or cruel, and finally, strange or different” (p. 55).

Contemporary media while profiling Muslims and Islam use almost same set of images and language that was used 10 and 20 and even 30 years ago (Conte, 2001). Following is a table of figures compiled by Whitaker (2002) containing the use of the word *Muslim* before and after the incident of 9/11 attacks in leading newspaper of the United Kingdom.

Table 1. The use of Word ‘Muslim’ in Leading Newspapers of United Kingdom

Newspaper	2000-2001	2001-2002	% Increase
Guardian	817	2,043	250
Independent	681	1,556	228
Times	535	1,486	278
Telegraph	417	1,176	282
Mail	202	650	322
Mirror	164	920	561
Express	139	305	219
Sun	80	526	658
Star	40	144	360

Representation of Muslims in Literature

Conceptualizations about Islam and Muslims as ‘*the other*’ and their institutionalization by Europe are not a new fabrication. Right from Greeks to Dark Ages, especially during the Crusade Wars until the very events such as the bombing of Oklahoma, the Gulf War, and the attacks on Twin Towers, Muslims are represented through false images and fabricated myths as ‘the Enemy’ of mankind and ‘the Other’ of humanity. These onslaughts on Islam and Muslims when studied synchronically highlight one thing i.e., there is no change in the contents of representation though the means of representation have changed drastically. That is why Said (1996) argues that it seems media have aversion to Islam and Muslims.

Contemporary fiction is also not lacking behind in disfiguring the East and Muslims. In the context of 9/11 texts such as *Pattern Recognition* (2003) by William Gibson, *Windows on the World* (2003) by Frederic Beigbeder, Lawrence Block's *Small Town* (2003), John le Carre's *Absolute Friends* (2004), Claire Tristram's *After* (2004), Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* (2008), H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2009), David Goodwillie's *American Subversive* (2010), Pearl Abraham's *American Taliban* (2010), are only few of the novels among the long list of representations imbued with anti-Muslim sentiments.

Research Methodology

The present study is a qualitative research aims at the exploring the discursive identity of the protagonists of the novel *Terrorist* (namely Ahmad) which is revealed to us through his own words as well as through the discourse produced by the novelist. So, no other methodology will be more appropriate than Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for analysis. Fiske (1994) writes that our words are never neutral. They are always in a flux, take on new meanings in different contexts. Their meanings can never be pinned down neither they can come to a standstill. They are not static rather dynamic. Words are the carrier of ideology. Van Dijk (2000) opines that the words of those in power are taken as "self-evident truths" and the words of those not in power are dismissed as irrelevant, inappropriate, or without substance. So, there exists a binary relationship between dominant discourses and the marginalized discourses. The dominant discourse caters to the needs of the bourgeoisie class and always favors the elite. While the marginalized discourse is considered as inappropriate and counter-productive against the elite.

For the present study, the tools enunciated by James Paul Gee (2011) in his Toolkit entitled *How to Do Discourse Analysis* are applied to the text of the novel *Terrorist* (2006) by American novelist John Updike. Out of 27 tools suggested by Gee, the researcher has implied only three tools that are more appropriate for doing critical discourse analysis for the present study. These three tools are as under:

1. The Significance Building Tool (would be referred as TSBT)
2. The Identities Building Tool (would be referred as TIBT)
3. The Big ‘D’ Discourse Tool (would be referred as TBDDT)

Regarding the Significance Building Tool, Gee (2011) says “*For any communication, ask how words and grammatical devices are being used to build up or lessen significance (importance, relevance) for certain things and not others*” (p. 198). While explaining the Identities Building Tool he argues that “*For any communication, ask what socially recognizable identity or identities the speaker is trying to enact or to get others to recognize. Ask also how the speaker’s language treats other people’s identities*” (p. 199). Furthermore, while describing *The Big ‘D’ Discourse Tool* Gee (2011) contends

For any communication, ask how the person is using language, as well as ways of acting, interacting, believing, valuing, dressing, and using various objects, tools, and technologies in certain sorts of environments to enact a specific socially recognizable identity and engage in one or more socially recognizable activities. Even if all you have for data is language, ask what Discourse is this language part of, that is, what kind of person (what identity) is this speaker or writer seeking to enact or be recognized as. What sorts of actions, interactions, values, beliefs, and objects, tools, technologies, and environments are associated with this sort of language within a particular Discourse? (p. 201)

Analysis

Text 1

“They are paid to instill virtue and democratic values by the state government down in the Trenton, and that satanic government farther down, in Washington, but the values they believe are Godless: biology and chemistry and physics. On the facts and formulas of these their false voices firmly rest, ringing out into the classroom.” (Updike, 2006, p. 4)

Context

Ahmad is expressing his anger and dissatisfaction over American culture and their way of living. He criticizes their religion, government and culture. He is very disillusioned with American way of life.

Discussion

TSBT shows that these lines reveal Ahmad’s unconscious and his perception about life at Central High School. Ahmad’s remarks that *‘They are paid to instill virtue and democratic values by the state government down in the Trenton, and that satanic government farther down, in Washington’* are very blunt and straightforward. The teachers are paid for what, is told to us by Ahmad and that is *‘virtue’* and *‘democratic values’*. This is an ironical comment of Ahmad because the next phrase in the sentence *‘satanic government’* makes it quite clear what he meant by *‘virtue’* and *‘democratic values’*. The very next remark of Ahmad is even very harsh that *‘the values they believe are Godless’*. It is third time that Ahmad calls them infidels, and Godless, and lacking true faith. It shows Ahmad’s disliking and his angst against Americans and Jews.

On the other hand *TIBT* constructs his identity as an anti-modern Muslim who hates *‘biology, chemistry and physics’*. It forms his subjectivity as a Muslim character alien to western modernity and technology. It shows Ahmad’s aversion to modern sciences and his non-interest in studies.

To sum up, we can argue that Ahmad’s identity acquires the status of anti-modern Muslim character who does not like modern sciences, one who only

thinks of himself on the righteous path and all others are Godless, infidels and lack true faith.

Text 2

“He said the college track exposed me to the corrupting influences- bad philosophy and bad literature. Western culture is Godless.”
(Updike, 2006, p. 38)

Context

Jack Levy who is a guidance counselor at Central High School is interviewing Ahmad. Jack is narrating these lines with reference to Ahmad. He was explaining to Jack the reasons of his learning driving a truck on the instructions of his religious mentor, Sheikh Rashid.

Discussion

Words such as ‘*corrupting influences, bad philosophy, bad literature, Godless*’ discursively misrepresent Ahmad’s identity. Like Updike, Jack is also a Jew who is describing what Ahmad has shared with him. *TIBT* points out Ahmad’s identity as a Muslim character who does not take his education seriously and who thinks that the college has ‘*corrupt influence*’ over him and it imparts ‘*bad philosophy*’ and ‘*bad literature.*’ It makes him a subject who shuns modern education. Perhaps Updike is trying to show to the world that why Muslims do not get modern education and why they are lagging behind in modern education. Further, Ahmad targets western culture by saying that it is ‘*Godless*’. Ahmad time and again blames west without any God and that the westerns are devils. He thinks that only Islam and Muslims have a God. For a western reader it is highly critical remark which is not acceptable in any case. Situations and things such as these negatively construct Ahmad’s identity as an anti-modern and anti-education individual who only emphasizes getting Islamic and Qur’anic education. Whatever Ahmad is doing, thinking and participating is constructed, manipulated and controlled by Updike. So it is Updike’s perceptions and ideology about Muslims that we encounter in the form of Ahmad.

To conclude, it can be argued that Updike is misrepresenting Ahmad through Jack and it exposes Updike’s ideology about Muslims which can

be seen through the analysis of his discourse. Ahmad here exhibits his identity as an individual averse to modern education, philosophy and literature, a religious fanatic who thinks that God is the personal property of Muslims and the whole western culture is Godless. Updike shows Ahmad distancing himself from Western modern education.

Text 3

“You have been gracious to me and I was curious. It is helpful, upto a point, to know the enemy.”

“Enemy? Whoa. You didn’t have no enemies there.”

“My teacher at the mosque says that all the unbelievers are our enemies. The Prophet said that eventually all unbelievers must be destroyed.” (Updike, 2006, p. 68)

Context

Ahmad and Joryleen are talking to each other in the lines under discussion. Ahmad goes to the Church on the invitation of Joryleen to hear her singing a solo in a choir. She expresses her gratitude and Ahmad in turn says that it is helpful to know the enemy.

Discussion

Updike here is trying to build some significance about the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Sheikh Rashid and of Islam. Using *TSBT* it can be argued that when Ahmad quotes the Holy Prophet ‘*The Prophet said that eventually all unbelievers must be destroyed,*’ Updike –through Ahmad –is trying to signify what the Prophet of Muslims said about the unbelievers. Updike has no right to quote Prophet’s words without proper reference and out of context. He is building the significance of the fact that since all the Americans are not Muslims so ‘*eventually all unbelievers must be destroyed*’ which gives the impression that Muslims want to destroy all unbelievers and that is why they become terrorists.

With the help of *TIBT* we can interpret these lines because they seem to discursively misconstruct the identity of Ahmad, Prophet Muhammad

(SAW) and of Islam. Ahmad's hatred against unbelievers (here it refers to Americans) comes to forefront when he says to Joryleen '*It is helpful, upto a point, to know the enemy.*' The word '*enemy*' startles Joryleen and she expresses her shock '*Enemy?*' and then she explains to Ahmad that there are no enemies here in the church. Firstly, Ahmad quotes his teacher Sheikh Rashid who says that '*all the unbelievers are our enemies*' and then he quotes Prophet Muhammad (SAW) '*that eventually all unbelievers must be destroyed.*' Although it is Ahmad who is uttering these sentences in the novel yet we know that it is Updike who is driving the plot of the novel. So Updike misconstrues the identity of Ahmad as well as he misrepresents the words of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) by quoting it out of context and without proper reference.

To sum up, Ahmad acknowledges to Joryleen that '*You have been gracious to me*' which points out that Joryleen is good natured girl. Updike marks her identity in positive colors through Ahmad but his own identity is being marked in a negative way by Updike. We can notice in these lines a sharp contrast between the construction of the identities of Ahmad and Joryleen through Updike's discourse.

Text 4

"Poor Jack," Beth continues, rising above the slur, "he's been knocking himself out to get this boy out of the grip of the mosque. They're like Baptist fundamentalists, only worse, because they don't care if they die." (Updike, 2006, p. 131)

Context

Beth, the wife of Mr. Levy, is talking to her sister Hermione. Hermione works with the Secretary of the State. They both are conversing over the telephone about Jack and Ahmad. Beth's remarks become very significant here for Ahmad's identity formation.

Discussion

TBDDT assists in understanding the hidden meaning in Updike's discourse. The application of *TBDDT* becomes relevant here because the lines under discussion deals with the existing power relations between the West and the

Muslim. When Beth tells Hermione that '*Poor Jack has been knocking himself out to get this boy out of the grip of the mosque,*' Beth shows her sympathy with Jack by calling him '*Poor Jack*' as if he were engaged in a very uphill task. Beth's phrase '*out of the grip of mosque*' is very critical of Beth because it shows as if it were a very abhorrent place near Beth. It is of vital importance to note that why Jack wants to keep Ahmad out of the grip of mosque or is it a place that breeds evil and violence? Jack's hard efforts '*to get this boy out of the grip of mosque*' point out that perhaps in Updike's estimation mosques are such places from where men should avoid getting into and that is why Jack is trying his best to keep Ahmad at an arm's length from the mosque as well as from the influence of Sheikh Rashid.

Beth's criticism becomes more poignant when she says '*They're like Baptist fundamentalists*' hence declaring them (Muslims) fundamentalists. Her criticism of Muslims does not stop here but she further uses superlative degree to describe them '*only worse.*' Furthermore, Beth says '*they don't care if they die*' meaning that they don't value life. They can go to every extent to kill non-Muslims even at the cost of their own lives. They become terrorists.

To sum up, it can be said that throughout the narrative, Updike creates a discourse to construct knowledge about his Muslim character to serve his vested interests. Through the conversation between Beth and her sister Hermione, Updike is constructing a discourse about Ahmad's identity where two different cultures are conflicting with each other. The discourse of Updike constructs a terrorist identity here for Muslims.

Text 5

"He's very tight-lipped- he has to be- but there are some imams, if I'm pronouncing it right, that distinctly bear watching. They all preach terrible things against America, but some of them go beyond that. I mean, in advocating violence against the state." (Updike, 2006, p. 134)

Context

The lines under discussion are part of the ongoing conversation between Beth and Hermione on telephone. Hermione is telling Beth about the nature

of her job with the Secretary of the State. She tells him that the Secretary is very worried about cyber war and the prevailing security situation in the USA.

Discussion

The words of Hermione are misrepresenting the Muslim Imam's identity when seen through *TIBT*. Hermione says '*They all preach terrible things against America*' signifying that the Muslim Imams preach '*terrible things*' and what Updike means by terrible things are nothing short of violence, terrorism, extremism and radicalism. Hermione says that Muslim Imams go beyond that and advocate '*violence against the state.*' Despite the fact that the rank of Imam is very sacred and high in Islam, Updike is leveling such discriminatory allegations against them. We know that the Sheikh Rashid is the Imam at a mosque and Updike shows him brainwashing Ahmad's mind to be a terrorist and blow the Lincoln Tunnel and in this way practically showing Sheikh Rashid engaged in advocating violence against the state.

In nutshell, the discourse of their conversation suggests that Muslim Imams turn young Muslims to terrorists by preaching violence against USA. In this way, it misrepresents Muslim Imam in the eyes of western readership.

Text 6

"Who says that unbelief is innocent? Unbelievers say that. God says, in the Qur'an, Be ruthless to unbelievers. Burn them, crush them, because they have forgotten God. They think to be themselves is sufficient. They love this present life more than the next." (Updike, 2006, p. 294)

Context

Mr. Levy is trying to stop Ahmad '*I can't believe you're seriously intending to kill hundreds of innocent people*' (p.294) and Ahmad utters these lines in response to Charlie's remark which are currently under the focus of our discussion.

Discussion

The application of *TBDDT* will reveal that Updike is very carefully disseminating a biased discourse about the thinking patterns of Ahmad. Updike constructs his identity and exposes his mind before the readers by putting such sentences in Ahmad's mouth. When Mr. Levy says that he cannot believe that Ahmad can think of killing innocent people, Ahmad startles and says '*Who say that unbelief is innocent?*' illustrating that in his estimation unbelief is never innocent, and if it is innocent, it is only unbelievers who say that. He then refers the matter again to Qur'an that God says '*Be ruthless to unbelievers. Burn them, crush them.*' The Qur'anic explanation of Ahmad which is again out of its proper context and without specific reference seems as if he were providing a justification to Mr. Levy for destroying the unbelievers. Further, he gives reasons for destroying them that '*because they have forgotten God. They think to be themselves is sufficient. They love this present life more than the next.*' According to Ahmad, three things are the cause of their destruction. Firstly, they have forgotten God. Secondly, relying on themselves i.e., they neither pray to God nor ask anything from Him, and thirdly, they love present life. All these things are indirectly said about the people of America whom Ahmad wants to destroy. Updike's discourse is making it obvious that Ahmad wants to kill all those who do not live their lives according to Ahmad's creed. His discourse has constructed Ahmad's subjectivity as one who does not follow the policy of '*live and let live.*' He is shown as an extremist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that by narrating such controversial things through the character of Ahmad, Updike has misrepresented the word of God which is highly sacred and respectable for the Muslims. He has misrepresented Ahmad as well as Islam. He has shown Ahmad as a Muslim who is against acquiring modern education. He has demonstrated that religion Islam inculcates violent and terrorist teachings into the minds of his adherents and breeds violence in society. After the tragedy of 9/11, it has become a cliché in the west and Updike's discourse is also propounding the same views against Islam. So, Updike has shown Sheikh Rashid using Ahmad for destroying the non-believers. He has misrepresented not only Ahmad and Sheikh Rashid but also Iraqi Muslims, Habib Chehab and his son Charlie Chehab (Lebanese Muslims settled in USA) through his narrative. He misrepresents Arabs, Black Muslims of Africa, Pakistani Muslims, Syrian Muslims, Nigerian Mullahs, Afghan Talibans, Holy

Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and the will and word of God through his discourse. The findings of the present study reveal that Updike has discursively employed the western stereotypes to misrepresent Muslims of the world.

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