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Great Expectations in Hard Times: A Reading of John Updike's *Terrorist*

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Abstract

While the core of Updike's prolific oeuvre veers broadly around his 'three secret things' as sex, religion and art, delineating the attitudes and platitudes of adultery of American middle-class suburbia, *Terrorist* (2006) is singularly exceptional not only with respect to the context of 9/11 in which it is set, but also in terms of its rare apocalyptic treatment, hitherto absent in Updike. Set in the suburb of 'New Prospect', New Jersey, the novel traces the development of Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, the 18-year-old radical Islamic, whose great expectations of his spiritual fidelity to Allah actually border on religious fanaticism during the hard times America was passing through. Living in a veritable bleak house with his liberal mother whom he detests and an absent father for whom his heart famishes, Ahmad finds his solace in his unflinching faith in Allah. Haunted by this blind faith, he falls prey to the religious sophistry of his imam, Shaikh Rashid, whose eisegeses on Islam traps him into a terrorist conspiracy of blowing up the Lincoln Tunnel. This paper intends to point out the basic lacuna of Ahmad's problem – the gap between his expectations and his achievements, between the ideal and the real – which triggers off his seeming failure in this novel. This paper proposes to argue that in *Terrorist* Updike wanted to exemplify the gap between the ideal and the real, between what Ahmad hopes and what he finds, and it is his pursuit of filling in this gap that he is invested with great expectations wrought by his undeviating faith in his religion, and it is because of the hard times prevailing in America that his great expectations are perpetually shattered and denied.

Keywords: expectations, failure, faith, religion, Ahmad, Islam, America, 9/11

"Between the idea
And the reality

Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow” – T.S. Eliot (“The Hollow Men”)

In his famous interview with Charles Thomas Samuels, Updike claims:

My fiction about the daily doings of ordinary people has more history in it than history books, just as there is more breathing history in archaeology than in a list of declared wars and changes in government. (Plath 37)

An undeviating devotee of realism, Updike has remained faithful to his contemporary America and has given splendid literary expression to the evolution of his society and nation through his prolific lurid oeuvre. “America without Updike to record it”, rightly claims Joyce Carol Oates, is “unthinkable” (Harold Bloom 68). While the core of Updike lies in his exhaustive depiction of middle-class American suburbia with a rare comprehensiveness, he was equally capable of depicting political issues. In one of his interviews, Updike asserted to Micheal Sragow:

You are born into one political contract or another, whose terms, though they sit very lightly at first, eventually in the form of the draft, or taxes, begin to make heavy demands on you (Plath 61).

While he was intrinsically drawn toward the realm of the visual world chiefly because of his family background and his early desire to be a cartoonist, and while the matrix of his canon veers chiefly around the triangle of religion, sex, and art, Updike was equally sensitive to socio-political and cultural issues. We get the first inkling of his political sensibility in his chapter “On Not Being a Dove” from his memoir *Self-Consciousness*. Still, earlier, the same political sensibility finds vivid literary manifestation particularly in *Rabbit Redux* (1971) mainly through the Vietnam war-veteran Skeeter. Updike believed that a novel intrinsically affords oneself with a perfect acquaintance of a place, and expresses the same in his interview with Jean-Pierre Salgas:

I would say that nothing allows you to go deeply into a place more than a novel does. You can read everything you want about 19th-century Russia, but you are still left with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and Turgenev. That is what I am trying to do: to say what is changing in the

United States – through the imagination, to tell the truth about the United States. (Plath 177).

This comment may be loosely read as one of his aesthetic credos in that the evolution of his career shows a clear shift from his early inclination toward the domestic and the quotidian to the experimental and the apocalyptic: from his earlier *Poorhouse Fair*, Rabbit novels, *Couples*, Bech stories, and *Marry Me* situated in the core of domesticity; to his effort to revisit Hawthorne through his *Scarlet Letter Trilogy* in the middle-phase of his career; to his effort to find out new pastures in a foreign land as in *The Coup* and *Brazil*; to his attempt to experiment with Feminism in both the Eastwick novels and with the apocalyptic in *Toward the End of Time* and *Terrorist*.

But long before the conception of *Terrorists* and much before 9/11, Updike had tried to hint at an anti-American ideology in *The Coup*, particularly through the creation of Colonel Qadhafi. But Updike, himself clarifies the difference in his attitudes in these two novels in his interview with Matt Nelson:

The Coup was about global politics. There was the Soviet Union to consider, and it was about the position of the Third World while the Cold War was going on. But yes, I did read the Quran for that book and I did portray an African dictator a little like Colonel Qadhafi of Libya, who spouted a lot of anti-American rhetoric. So, when I came to write this some years later, I had to refresh my memory of the Quran.

But Ahmad is an 18-year-old high-school student who has absorbed other people's rhetoric, whereas Colonel Ellellou in *The Coup* was a self-invented, semi-American man.¹

In his eventful career one may notice so many purple patches each of which remains prominent because of its distinct feature: for example, the Rabbit Tetralogy, Updike's American epic written in prose, is different from his intertextual evocation of Hawthorne in *Scarlet Letter Trilogy*; *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Seek My Face*, on the other hand, "stand as departures", argues Schiff, "in the masculine-centered Updike canon by featuring a female protagonist" (46); and while *Memories of the Ford Administration* is steeped in history, *The Coup* and *Brazil* are his attempts to pitch his literary camp outside America. Written against the backdrop of 9/11, *Terrorist* (2006), is indubitably one of such purple patches in his career. During the traumatic moment of 9/11 Updike was present with his second wife.

“On the morning of September 11”, records Begley, “woke up in Brooklyn Heights, where they were staying in the tenth-floor apartment of Martha’s son Jason” (465). As Updike later relates it:

A four-year-old girl and a babysitter called from the library and pointed out through the window the smoking top of the north tower, not a mile away. It seemed at first glance, more curious than horrendous: smoke speckled with bits of paper curled into the cloudless sky, and strange inky rivulets ran down the giant structure’s vertically corrugated surface. (*Due Considerations* 117).

The memory of this horrible incident loomed large on his sensibility, and he gave vent to the same in an interview in 2006:

[T]he theme of terrorism was there, and I had my sense of participating in it vicariously, and I thought it would be a service to the state of the nation and the world of fiction if I tried to dramatise a young man, a young devout self-converted Muslim living in Northern New Jersey, in a not-very-promising metropolis city, and tried to dramatise him from within and show how he was slowly involved in a terrorist plot. (Qtd. in Batchelor 53).

The next year Updike wrote a short story, “Varieties of Religious Experience” which was published posthumously in his collection *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories* in 2009. That a peerless chronicler of contemporary America and such a prolific writer as Updike with his “seismographic ears for the tremors of his time”, as Adam Gopnik so wonderfully puts it, would remain satisfied just with a short story or a few interviews was unlikely (335). Little wonder then, the conception of a novel on 9/11 was quite natural for a prolific writer as Updike.

Terrorists elicited a wide variety of responses from reviewers and critics some of whom criticised it in scathing terms. Christopher Hitchensⁱⁱ in his Review of the book criticizes it saying “Updike has produced one of the worst pieces of writing from any grown-up source since the events he has so unwisely tried to draw upon”. Hitchens’s criticism appears lopsided and does not hold much water in it when we notice the immense potential of this rich novel. Michiko Kakutaniⁱⁱⁱ criticizes this novel in scathing terms particularly because he created an unnatural hero like Ahmad. Describing Updike’s creation of Ahmad as “more robot than a human being” and as a “static one-dimensional stereotype”, Michiko Kakutani digs at

Terrorist contending that “the ensuing developments in this maladroit novel prove to be every bit as dubious as Ahmad is as a recognisable human being”. Kakutani possibly misses the complexity of Ahmad’s character so wonderfully delineated by his creator in the novel. And far from being a “maladroit novel”, *Terrorist* reaffirms Updike’s panache as an adroit connoisseur of fiction. In his wonderful study, *Running Toward the Apocalypse: John Updike’s New America*, Bob Batchelor argues that *terrorists* “captures Updike’s vision of a new America and the nation’s relationship to the broader global community in the twenty-first century” (24). In yet another interesting research, ‘ “Whiteness of a Different Color”? Racial Profiling in John Updike’s *Terrorist*’ Mita Banerjee examines the racial aspects of this novel from a postcolonial perspective.

But all these reviewers and critics have failed to detect the basic lacuna of Ahmad’s problem – the gap between his expectations and his achievements, between the ideal and the real – which triggers off his seeming failure in this novel. In this paper, I propose to argue that *Terrorist* Updike wanted to exemplify the gap between the ideal and the real, between what Ahmad hopes and what he finds, and it is his pursuit of filling in this gap that he is invested with great expectations wrought by his undeviating faith in his religion, and it is because of the hard times prevailing in America that his great expectations are perpetually shattered and denied. Pitted against the hard times of contemporary America, Ahmad’s great expectations manifested through his unflinching faith in his religion get thwarted.

II

It was Quentin Miller who in his wonderful research *John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain* makes an exhaustive study of the impact of the Cold War on Updike’s literary career. Miller argues, “Updike’s America is driven by the constant negotiation between what our nation hopes to be and what it is” (3). Thus, Miller presupposes a gap between the ideal and the real. I contend that things did not change much even after the Cold War, and even after the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. in 1989. On the contrary, America’s increasing participation in the Middle East along with her involvement in the Gulf Wars had aggravated her relationship with some Islam nations. Broadly speaking the aftermath of the Cold War,

America's foreign policy, the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the internecine strife among the Jews and the Muslims, the power-hankering equations existing among some of the Islamic factions, and the American neo-colonial enterprise to control the natural resources of oil in the Middle – East are some of the factors that precipitated the unfortunate attacks of 9/11^{iv} I further argue that in the post-9/11 scenario, things remained almost the same. The Americans with their American Dream still looming large over their sensibility tried to retain the previous state of innocence, particularly because contemporary times became difficult for them. In *Terrorist* Updike however grapples with this problem not through the perspective of an American, but through his hero Ahmad, the product of an Egyptian father and a white American mother.

Updike's choice of two epigraphs amply reflects some of the thematic concerns of the novel. The first epigraph taken from Jonah (4:3-4) relates to Jesus Christ's counseling to Jonah, the son of Amittai, suggesting he relinquish his anger which has stimulated a suicidal wish in him. Thus, the message of Christ is to eschew one's self-destructive motivation, a message that Updike decontextualises and transfers from Christianity to Islam for the ultimate rescue of his hero Ahmad from being trapped in the terrorist activity through a suicidal mission. Interestingly, had Updike made Ahmad a successful victim of this terrorist act through the eventual exploding of the Lincoln Tunnel, *Terrorist* would have been just a journalistic account of another attack perpetrated by terrorists throughout the world. But Updike turns out to be a more artistic writer by allowing Ahmad to extricate himself from the tangle of his sham Imam Shaikh Rashid through an epiphanic revelation. Furthermore, it enables Ahmad to reinforce his faith in the creative opulence of Allah, and by so doing, Updike marks a telling departure from those who blindly hold Islam to be the only cause of terrorism. Finally, by creating the epiphanic moment in Ahmad, Updike presents Islam also from a positive perspective. The second epigraph taken from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *Of Love and Other Demons* anticipates the dialogic conflict between faith and disbelief so wonderfully envisaged in this novel and exemplified through the conflict of its hero Ahmad.

Before I proceed, I wish to briefly clarify the otherwise enigmatic nature of the title of my paper. While Updike's *Terrorist* or any other

novel has nothing to do with Dickens, the fictional world of this Victorian master was pervaded with criminals, delinquents, offenders, police, prison houses, and lawyers. Furthermore, if *Great Expectations* captures Pip's disenchantment and if *Hard Times* engenders the failure of utilitarianism, *Terrorist* presents the disenchantment and failure of its hero in a world pervaded with bleakness, crime, and terror. But I have used the phrases "great expectations" and "hard times" not because of Dickens but despite Dickens. The rationale for selecting such a catchy title is supported by the text itself, and not by any extraneous factor. Toward the end of the novel when Ahmad is with his truck full of explosives and was forging ahead towards the Lincoln Tunnel on his suicidal mission, he feels: "In a few minutes I am going to see the face of God. My heart overflows with the expectation" (303). The first portion of my title may be traced to this particular comment. Besides, there are sporadic textual references that amply attest to his sense of great expectations. "Your faith – it's important to you", says Jack Levy to Ahmad, and further exhorts him saying, "you have a *great* life, my friend" (42, 43) (Emphasis mine). Ahmad's great expectations are sustained throughout the novel chiefly through his unflinching faith in his religion.

A clarification on the second key – phrase of my title, "hard times", becomes necessary to substantiate my thesis. To be set in the backdrop of 9/11 is indisputably hard times for any text. But Updike gives us ample textual references to reinforce the idea that hard times were still prevailing in America. Ahmad's search in the television for "traces of God in this infidel society" may be interpreted as his frantic efforts to cling to his great expectations in the hard times America has been passing through (194). The snatches of telephonic conversation between Beth and his elder sister Hermione who works in the office of the Secretary of Homeland Security, smack of a sinister design and a vicious circle operating during these hard times to aid and abet terrorism. We referred to how "[t]errorists are blowing up oil pipes and power plants in Iraq" in one of their conversations (264). In another conversation, Hermione gives Beth a shocking account of militancy infiltrated mainly through the ports:

Hundreds of container ships go in and out of American ports every day, and nobody knows what's in a tenth of them. They could be

bringing in atomic weapons labeled Argentinean cowhides or something. Brazilian coffee – or who's sure it's coffee? Or think of these huge tankers, not just the oil, but, say liquid propane. That's how they ship propane, liquefied. But think of what would happen in Jersey City or under the Bayonne Bridge if they got to it with just a few pounds of Semtex or TNT. Beth, it would be a conflagration: thousands of dead...Think of a few men with assault rifles in a mall anywhere in America...We can never be happy again – we Americans." (131-132).

Significantly, Updike's evocation of hard times takes into account both the intrinsic factors and the extrinsic factors. Updike casts his net wide and offers us snapshot details of not only how militants are trying to destabilize the U.S.A. through the smuggling of weapons and explosives through sinuous clandestine ways, but also how America herself is involved in perpetuating her hegemonic role in the Middle East. "We are servants, basically of reality", claimed Updike in his interview with Alvin P. Sanoff, and he does not hush up any facade of reality, however unpalatable it may be. This not only attests to his sense of verisimilitude, and expands the scope of his discussion, but, more importantly, adds to the sense of his objectivity. Charlie's speech smacks of the hard times induced by what may be termed a Neo-colonialism in which some of the Asian countries have been consigned to live:

That the Muslim peasant in Mindanao need not starve, that the Bangladesh child need not drown, that the Egyptian villager need not go blind with schistosomiasis, that the Palestinians need not be strafed by Israeli helicopters, that the faithful need not eat the sand and camel dung of the world while the great Satan grows fat on sugar and pork and underpriced petroleum. They believe that a billion followers of Islam need not have their eyes and ears and souls corrupted by the poisonous entertainments of Hollywood and a ruthless economic imperialism whose Christian-Jewish God is a decrepit idol, a mere mask concealing the despair of atheists". (198-99).

This particular speech captures Updike's concern for the "other". By showing such a concern, he at once evokes another version of hard times prevailing outside the U.S.A., and by so doing, he assigns equal significance to the periphery ("other") as he gives to the center (U.S.A.). In other words, Updike strikes an objective note by privileging the periphery along with the center. This concern for the "other", this objective outlook, this privileging of the periphery, and

this global focus make *terrorists* amenable to a diasporic, and postcolonial reading.

Terrorist Updike offers us different versions of hard times with nuanced implications. The evocation of Ahmad's hard times comes in terms of the crass slavery of others to the dictates of their sensuality. As he says to his girlfriend Joryleen Grant: "I look around me, and I see slaves – slaves to drugs, slaves to fads, slaves to television, slaves to sports heroes that don't know they exist, slaves to the unholy, meaningless opinions of others" (73). The comment of Shaikh Rashid to Ahmad induces a feeling of dystopia in his mind. "Did you not discover", asks Shaikh Rashid to Ahmad, "that the world, in its American portion, emits a stench of waste and greed, of sensuality and futility, of the despair and lassitude that come with the ignorance of the inspired wisdom of the Prophet? (233). A social critic of his times and an excellent chronicler, Updike offers us a brilliant critique of moral degeneration to suggest the social and moral hard times rocking and raking America:

Once you run out of steam, America doesn't give you much. It doesn't even let you die, what with the hospitals sucking all the money they can out of Medicare. Drug companies have turned doctors into crooks. (304).

Little wonder then, America was indeed passing through the miasma of hard times with its varied ramifications and alarming proportions.

III

My reading of Updike's *Terrorist* has led me to a host of findings, many of which do not cohere with Updike's detractors in this novel. *Terrorist* presents Updike as a pan-American and an international novelist, rather than a pigeonholed regional writer. It marks a transcendence and evolution in his career from a hitherto so-called Pennsylvanian writer to an international writer capturing the angst and Zeitgeist of the contemporary world. Updike himself had anticipated his plan of getting out of his America and widening his ken in his interview with Terry Gross:

Every writer has to find some balance, surely, between being at home and doing the work and getting out and living and seeing the world. I've maybe stuck to my desk more than most, but plan in the future of

get away a bit. I think we have to, just to let ourselves know that there's more to the world than our desks and our window. (Plath 210).

That Updike has evolved into a more mature, more complex, and richer artist is attested by the very choice of his subject in *Terrorist*. This shift from the domestic to the apocalyptic in *Terrorist* is also what accounts for its distinctiveness in Updike's canon. Quentin Miller was amply justified in detecting the evolution of Updike when he argued:

...the Bomb is often overlooked as instrumental in shaping his writings, The young writer worked hard to avoid the terrifying reality of the Nuclear Age, concentrating instead on the artistic and metaphysical questions that have intrigued him throughout his career; but like his characters, Updike would gradually discover that the threats of nuclear war were undeniable and that these threats must eventually be confronted. (16-17).

Furthermore, if Updike is an acknowledged master who captures the day-to-day, ordinary, quotidian flux of American middle-class suburbia faithfully and comprehensively with all its attitudes and platitudes, *Terrorist* marks a telling shift in his long career, revealing him capable of capturing the apocalyptic, violent moments of American and global history simultaneously. In other words, *Terrorist* adds to the variety, complexity, comprehensiveness, and richness of Updike who can reckon with almost anything taking place around him with admirable *éclat* and great *panache*.

It adds to Updike's sense of verisimilitude and consolidates his role as a chronicler of America. One cannot but be reminded of his "Rabbit Tetralogy" which according to Greiner, is John Updike's *Barchester Chronicles* of Anthony Trollope used to "choreograph the social dance of our age" (*Updike's Novels* 84). According to Marshall Boswell, the Rabbit Tetralogy "serve as a fictionalised timeline of postwar American experience" (*John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy* 1). In The Tetralogy Updike chronicles sporadic moments from American and global history as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the moon shot in *Apollo 11*, the Civil Rights Movement, the Iran hostage crisis, the gasoline crisis, the proliferation of Toyota business in the U.S.A., the explosion of the Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, to name only a few. In *Terrorist* Updike completes the list, as it were,

and makes the wheel come full circle by exploring the traumatic moment of 9/11 which inspired this novel.

Although Ahmad in *Terrorist* is by no means a representative American character either racially, socially, or spiritually, he amazingly reflects one American trait – that his sense of mobility. Like Natty Bumppo's flight to the forest, Huck Finn's journey on the raft on the Mississippi, Captain Ahab's whale chase in the *Pequod*, Santiago's search for the big marlin through his repeated ventures on the sea, Sal Paradise's wild peregrinations across America, and of course, Rabbit's enigmatic ride in his ford in *Rabbit, Run*, Ahmad finds his truck as a suitable space to prove his freedom, courage, and sense of identity. His journey in his truck exhilarates him and gives him a sense of freedom like some of the great American heroes marked by their sense of mobility. Far from being a "robot", as Michiko Kakutani has put it, Updike's creation of Ahmad is one of the triumphs of this novel. While it is true that Updike's eighteen-years old hero does not fit into the paradigm of his counterparts and other teenagers given to flirting and merriment, his undeviating devotion to his religion and his unflinching faith in his Allah give Updike the scope to turn him into a bait of his imam who uses and entraps him for the nefarious action. Sensitive, serious, and devoted to his religion, he reminds me of a faint echo of Hamlet, barring the tragic grandeur of the Prince of Denmark: both are marked by their brooding natures; both are marked by missing fathers, either being dead or having left the family; both have a cold relationship with their mothers (both being adulterous); both are somewhat cold and whimsical, if not misogynistic, toward women; both are prisoners of indecisiveness and dilatoriness; both are intent upon revenge.

Terrorists may be subsumed under the broad paradigm of Updikean novels which exemplify the failure of religious faith chiefly because of the existence of some priest or religious preachers or whom George W. Hunt calls "cock-eyed clergymen or clergymen *manque*", i.e., sham preachers capable of adulterous indiscretions(182). If Reverend Thomas Marshfield distorts the real meaning of the Bible for his adulterous indiscretions, and if Arthur Steinmetz or the Arhat in *S.* distorts the actual import of Hindu scriptures for his adulterous liaison with the ashram women, in *Terrorist* Shaikh Rashid distorts the true message of the Holy Quran for his subversive

militant ends. Bruce Hoffman so pertinently reflects: “Religion and theological justification, in particular, that is communicated and encouraged by Muslim clerical authorities has played an important role in framing popular attitudes toward suicide operations and encouraging their followers to carry out acts of self-sacrifice on behalf of their community”. (*Inside Terrorism* 158). Terrorists have increasingly resorted to suicide bombings basically for two factors: they are both effective and inexpensive. Terrorists have repeatedly used religious fundamentalism to justify their subversive actions in general, and suicide attacks in particular. For example, on the Palestine Authority’s television Channel, some Islamic scholars justified the cause of suicide bombing:

When the Shahid[martyr] meets his Maker, all his sins are forgiven from the first gush of blood. He is exempted from the “torments of the grave”(Judgement); he sees his place in paradise, and he is shielded from the great shock, He is a heavenly advocate for 70 members of his family, on his head is placed a crown of honor, one stone of which is worth more than all there is in this world. (Qtd in Hoffman, 159).^v

One cannot but notice that Shaikh Rashid stimulates in Ahmad the temptation of embracing martyrdom through his suicidal mission almost through a similar forceful speech and vocal exhortations.

Although Updike himself was convinced of some violent passages in the Quran, he was equally aware of their positive sides. Updike reflects in his interview with Matt Nelson that:

The Quran is in some ways a beautiful book with beautiful quotes in it. It’s a little like the Old Testament in that it’s a mixture of poetry and prophecy and dogma. One reads it now with an eye toward how much violence toward unbelievers does it encourage, and what does it say about suicide even in a noble cause? I found there was quite a lot of violence in it and that the insurgents and terrorists do have some texts to quote, but I wouldn’t say that’s all that’s in the Quran. There’s quite a lot of moderation also.

But the Quran, like every other religious scripture, shuns violence and stimulates the message of love, kindness, and compassion. In his “Introduction” to *The Quran* translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan states in unambiguous terms the actual import of jihad^{vi} which is an inner struggle of an individual:

But jihad, taken in its correct sense, is the name of peaceful struggle rather than any kind of violent action. The Quranic concept of jihad is expressed in the following verse: 'Do greater jihad (i.e., strive more strenuously) with the help of this (i.e., the Quran).' (25: 52) (Ali xi).

Actually by 'greater jihad' Muhammad meant one's inner struggle against selfishness, greed, ego, and evil. Each Book of the Holy Quran begins with a reference to God as "Al-Rahman al-Rahim", meaning "God the Merciful and the Compassionate". John Esposito in his exposition on Islam and the Quran, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, reiterates the same notion of shying away from violence:

Islam, like all world religions, neither supports nor requires illegitimate violence. The Quran does not advocate or condone terrorism.... Every chapter of the Quran begins with a reference to God's mercy and compassion; (119).

Esposito makes it clear that "the Islamic tradition places limits on the use of violence and rejects terrorism, hijackings, and hostage-taking"(121). And when we come to Quran, we find wonderful passages exhorting its followers to eschew violence. Needless to say, the crafty imam Shaikh Rashid wistfully distorts the real message of the Quran for his subversive ends. For example, although Shaikh Rashid quotes the one-hundred-fourth sura from the Quran, about "God's kindled fire" (6), what he tactfully shuns is the opening of this sura which says that this fire is meant only for the "scandal-monger and backbiter" (Ali 421). But ironically, Ahmad is too loyal to him to be able to see through his deceptive self under the suavity of his appearance and the felicity of his tongue. Updike's deliberate strategy to create Ahmad as a somewhat unnatural guy whose tastes do not match with the remaining teenagers of his age and who consciously shuns flirting with girls or luxuriating in voluptuousness also accounts for his gullibility to his imam. Had it not been for Ahmad's off-the-track, introverted nature leading to his focus on his religion rather than on the material pleasures of life, he could scarcely have been entrapped in the nefarious terrorist plot hatched by his imam. Thus, those who raise their eyebrows at Ahmad's so-called unnatural behavior or criticize Updike because of that like Michiko Kakutani, have probably missed the potentiality of Ahmad's character, and have failed to situate him within the plot of the novel. In other words,

Ahmad's conception in an unfamiliar way conduces to the plot of the novel.

Terrorist re-enacts one of the popular Updikean motifs of introducing spiritual and philosophical debates or what Updike calls "moral debate with the reader" (Plath 50) or what Boswell calls "moral debate" ("Updike, religion, and the novel of moral debate" 43). Ahmad's situation may remind any perceptive reader of the epigraph Updike had used in his famous novel *Rabbit, Run*. It is in Ahmad that once may find how the "motions of grace" induced by his religious faith, giving rise to his great expectations, get congealed and hardened by the "hardness" and rigidity of his heart, chiefly under the hard times of "external circumstances". In Ahmad's case, the debate is double-edged: he is pulled apart by the opposite counselling of his counsellor Jack Levy and the preaching of his imam Shaikh Rashid. There are other forms of milder debates, such as those between Charlie and Ahmad. These extended debates in the novel make it amenable to a polyphonic reading of the novel from a Bakhtinian angle. In fact, like a polyphonic discourse, *Terrorist* accommodates the multiple voices of multiple characters clashing and coalescing within the same discourse. Rather than create a single authorial voice, Updike creates a plurality of voices ensconced by different characters and a perfect orchestration of those voices almost in a Bakhtinian sense, without erasing or eclipsing other voices. And like a polyphonic novel, each of these voices becomes equally plausible and valid. The dialogic conflict between faith and disbelief – as has been indicated by the second epigraph of the novel – gnaws Ahmad within. During his visit to the church with Joyrleen he listens to a sermon in which the preacher stressed the necessity of faith. Ahmad is delighted to find this message ratified by a similar message from the third sura of the Quran, and his faith in his religion becomes consolidated by many folds. I would like to argue, faith constitutes the staple of Ahmad's great expectations, or to put it conversely, Ahmad's great expectations are chiefly manifested through his unflinching faith in Allah.

Terrorist presents Updike at once as a realistic, visionary, and prophetic writer. He is indisputably a realist in his conception of Ahmad's innocence being marred by religious fundamentalism and distorted eisegeses on Islam offered by his imam Shaikh Rashid.

Updike is a visionary in that Ahmad's ultimate withdrawal from the suicidal act of blowing off the Lincoln Tunnel strikes the note of the author's optimism. This seemingly optimistic ending partly justifies the title of my paper: that the great expectations of Ahmad wrought by his undeviating devotion to his religion amid hard times are, after all, not lost. No longer at ease with his imam – a veritable spiritual hollow man – about whom Ahmad has already begun to hold a leery feeling, he may have been disenchanted; but this disenchantment leads him to a revised and more balanced form of his great expectations and creates in him an epiphanic moment in which he rejoices in the creative wonders of Allah who is more constructive than destructive. Finally, Updike turns out to be prophetic in this novel in that what he anticipates in this novel turns out to be the way of the world of so many terrorists nowadays^{viii}.

Interestingly perhaps, although the entire novel smacks of a vicious circle moving toward violent terrorist action, the novel does not end in violence. This may appear somewhat discordant with what the terrorists have been doing around the globe, but then, Ahmad's ultimate abstinence from the act of violence appears to be attuned to the Updikean spirit. "I feel a tenderness toward my characters that forbids me making violent use of them", comments Updike in his famous interview with Charles Thomas Samuels (Plath 37). The ending of the novel suggests Ahmad's refraining from his projected act of violence chiefly due to his almost epiphanic realisation of the real import and meaning of Islam, and partly due to the tactful maneuverings of Jack Levy, bespeaks both Ahmad's, as well as his creator's flexibility and sense of pragmatism. This epiphanic realisation may also be interpreted as quite Updikean, for in his interview with Jeff Campbell, Updike asserted, "My heroes, at least, are all struggling for some kind of inner certitude, illumination, or something" (Plath 95). This positive interpretation from the fifty-sixth sura of the holy Quran is tellingly significant in that unlike most of his contemporary spokesmen reacting to the 9/11 trauma in terms of a lopsided attack against Islam, Updike offers the more practical, more probable, and more convincing explanation: that Islam *per se* can never be the cause of terrorism; that it is the abuse of Islam by crafty people that triggers off such violent forces on earth. Rather than scoff at Islam as being culpable for the 9/11 attack and other

forms of terrorism, Updike harps on the right string and detects the right cause. Rather than being a dry blueprint of anti-terrorist propaganda, Updike's *Terrorist* turns out to be a rich mosaic where religious debates, political issues, personal conflicts, racial issues, postcolonial agenda, effects of globalisation, imperialistic factors, racial prejudice, US foreign policy, distortion of the Quran, social criticism, etc. are wonderfully fused.

My final finding of the novel makes me inclined to infer that *Terrorist* has the force of a political novel, an occasional novel, a postcolonial novel, a thriller, a detective fiction, a dystopian novel, a fable, an altered fairy tale (where the hero is liberated from the clutches of a wicked magician-like figure (here, Shaikh Rashid, who mesmerizes him) by the fairy godfather (here Jack Levy)), a propaganda novel, a 'condition-of-America' novel (if I were admitted to coin this term), a diasporic novel, a subversive novel, a trauma novel, and God knows what else! It is, as it were, Updike's *Crime and Punishment*, capturing the pride and prejudice of religiously and racially polarised people without any sense and sensibility, geared toward encroaching upon the power and the glory of the U.S.A.

Conclusion

A sensitive literary antenna like John Updike could capture all the wavelengths of his contemporary times and give literary shapes to them with admirable dexterity. Updike apprehends to Elinor Stout in 1975 that "we're always venturing from a radiant past into a dark future" and this is attested by the socio-political changes that took place since the placid Eisenhower era (Plath 78). In the same interview, Updike admits that "the gap between reality, on the one hand, and the novel, on the other, is still excitingly large and waiting to be closed. And it is not a gap that will be closed permanently by anybody because the quality of life keeps changing and the way we look at things keep changing" (Plath 83). This comment is attested by most of the Updikean heroes whose expectations did *not* cohere with their final experience. Commenting on the short fiction of Updike, Robert Luscher argues, "Updike's fiction is pervaded not only by a consciousness of the few decades' effect on marriage and the family but also by a religiously informed vision of the gap between the actual state of affairs and the desired sense of connection that

characters often seek in the realms of eros or memory” (154). Luscher’s observation of Updike’s short fiction can well be extended to *Terrorist* where this gap between Ahmad’s great expectations and his experience wrought by the hard times of his circumstances becomes prominent. Reflecting on the impact of the Cold War on Updike’s canon, Miller rightly points out that “American identity during and after the Cold War, according to Updike’s fiction, is based on the clash between early Cold War optimism and late Cold War disillusionment. The zeitgeist of Updike’s Cold War America is not paranoia, anticommunist hysteria, or anxiety, but rather nostalgia: a painful longing to return to the earlier, unfallen, innocent world of 1950s middle-class suburbia that no longer exists, and that only really ever existed in America’s imagination”(3). Taking my cue from Miller, I would like to contend that “the clash between early Cold War optimism and late Cold War disillusionment” has taken a more complex and more acute dimension following the events of 9/11. In a multi-dimensional novel like *Terrorist*, this gap is wonderfully exemplified through its equally wonderful hero, Ahmad, who, despite the dystopian hard times prevailing in America, frantically clings to his great expectations rooted in his religion. When that faith is shaken, he feels that those devils “*have taken away my God*” (310), and feels helpless and hapless. At once possessed with the indecisiveness of Hamlet, the split sensibility of a Raskolnikov, the temptation of embracing martyrdom (albeit through his suicidal mission) like a Thomas Beckett, and the unwavering faith in his religion like the faith of a Joan of Arc, Ahmad, finds it difficult to cope up with his great expectations in the crucible and miasma of his contemporary times, and between his idea and the reality, between his expectations and the experience, between the conception and the action, between the hope and the haul “falls the shadow” of hard times.

Notes & References

- i. Matt Nelson. “In the Mind of a Terrorist: An Interview with John Updike”. <<http://f.chtah.com/i/9/276579820/updike2.htm> > Accessed on 12 September 2016.
- ii. Christopher Hitchens, “No Way”, Rev. Of *Terrorist* by John Updike <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/06/no-way/304864/>> Accessed on 12 September 2016.

- iii. Michiko Kakutani, "John Updike's 'Terrorist' Imagines a Homegrown Threat to Homeland Security," *New York Times*, 6 June 2006.
- iv. Even before the eventful 9/11, attempts had been made to explode the World Trade Center. For example, on February 26, 1999, a few Muslim jihadists exploded a truck full of explosives into one of the sections of the World Trade Center.
- v. Hoffman quotes it from Kaplan and Marshall, *The Cult at the End of the World*, p.85.
- vi. For a better understanding of the concept of "jihad," one may consult Ahmed(434-435), Griffith(109-11), and Esposito(118-119).
- vii. For example, one may refer to this particular verse: "Whoever transgresses against you, respond in kind"(2: 194); or consult this verse: "O you who believe! Do not consume your wealth in the wrong way – rather only through trade mutually agreed to, and do not kill yourselves. Surely God is merciful toward you".(4:29)
- viii. To support my view let me quote from an email from David Updike given to me as his response to some of my queries: "As you know, he(Updike) was interested in all religions, to some extent, and was no doubt interested in Islam, and the ways it was being distorted and used by terrorists. As you know, some of the critics hated the book-- Christopher Hitchens and Anthony Lane, I believe, though I have not read the latter. I wonder if they would have changed their view in light of the Marathon Bombing here in Boston, which in many ways was eerily foreshadowed by Terrorists: an American High School Student, by all accounts normal, with a fairly stable home life, is drawn into a plot to kill hundreds of people, by an older male: in one case, the imam in terrorist, in another by his older brother. My son attended the high school where the Tsarnov brothers (sp?) went and graduated, My wife teaches there and knew the younger one, now in jail. He almost joined Model UN and was looked up to by many fellow students, and wrestlers. He was a normal kid, like Ahmad in 'Terrorist'. This might be something to consider – to what extent did 'Terrorist' predict the marathon bombing". (Message to the author. 11 September. 2016.E-mail.).

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