

Terrorism and Fiction

A Study of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid

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Since 9/11, terrorism research has flourished tremendously, drawing in diverse scholars from different social and behavioral disciplines. The amount of terrorism related literature is staggering and hard to keep up with, as new books, journal articles, and anthologies are published every day. As systematically collated by Lum, Kennedy and Sherley, 14,006 articles were published between 1971 and 2002 of which 6,041 were peer-reviewed¹. Of these articles, ‘approximately 54% were published in 2001 and 2002’². This veritable avalanche of studies has usefully energized the terrorism studies field with new intellectual talents offering fresh analytical angles and contextual and cultural depth. Some areas studies experts and newcomers to terrorism studies are making innovative contributions, like Quintan Wiktorowicz, Muhammed Hafez, Glenn Robinson, Marc Sageman, Robert Pape, James A. Piazza, Edwin Baaker and Jeroen Gunning. All newcomers to the terrorism studies field have constructed their own detailed databases of the life histories of terrorists and/or incidents from which they have drawn analysis and trends. At the same time, it is hardly surprising that the 9/11 attacks led to an almost impenetrable mountain of contributions that could be

¹ Stohl, M., 2008. ‘Old Myths, New Fantasies and the Enduring Realities of Terrorism’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1(1): 5–16.

² Lum, C., L. Kennedy, and A. Sherley, 2006. ‘The Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism Strategies: A Campbell Systematic Review’.

generously characterized as highly speculative in nature and without a high degree of rigorous scientific standard.

In 2001, according to the social science index, little more than 100 articles were published in the main journals and ‘that figure had almost trebled by the following year and has carried on rising. Andrew Silke has ‘indicated that a new book appears nearly every six hours, and Richard Jackson notes that, during this period, peerreviewed papers have increased by approximately 300%’³. New, innovative and interdisciplinary journals dealing with terrorism-related issues and research have appeared that promise to provide new theoretical and interdisciplinary insights and perspectives on the phenomenon, from *Critical Studies on Terrorism* to *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*. An array of new, exciting research centres, focusing on terrorism and political violence, have eclipsed older and more established university centres whose programs are seen to be stagnant and even decaying.

The close relationship between the academic field of terrorism studies and the US state means that it is critically important to analyse the research output from key experts within the academic community. This is particularly the case because of the aura of objectivity surrounding the terrorism ‘knowledge’ generated by academic experts. Running throughout the core literature is a positivist assumption, explicitly stated or otherwise, that the research conducted is apolitical. There is little to no reflexivity on behalf of the scholars, who see themselves as wholly dissociated from the politics surrounding the subject of terrorism. This reification of academic knowledge about terrorism is reinforced by those in positions of power in the US who tend to distinguish the experts from other kinds of overtly political actors. The representation of terrorism expertise as ‘independent’ and as providing

³ Lentini, P., 2008. ‘Review Essay – Understanding and Combatting Terrorism: Definitions, Origins and Strategies’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 43(1): 133.

‘objectivity’ and ‘facts’ has significance for its contribution to the policymaking process in the US. This is particularly the case given that core experts tend to insulate the broad direction of US policy from critique. Indeed, as Alexander George noted, it is *precisely because* ‘they are trained to clothe their work in the trappings of objectivity, independence and scholarship’ that expert research is ‘particularly effective in securing influence and respect for’ the claims made by US policymakers⁴.

Therefore, there are two problematic features which should be analysed in the field of terrorist studies. First, in the context of anti-US terrorism in the South, many important claims made by key terrorism experts simply replicate official US government analyses. This replication is facilitated primarily through a sustained and uncritical reliance on selective US government sources, combined with the frequent use of unsubstantiated assertion. This is significant, not least because official analyses have often been revealed as presenting a politically-motivated account of the subject. Second, and partially as a result of this mirroring of government claims, the field tends to insulate from critique those ‘counterterrorism’ policies justified as a response to the terrorist threat. In particular, the experts overwhelmingly ‘silence’ the way terrorism is itself often used as a central strategy within US-led counterterrorist interventions in the South. That is, ‘counterterrorism’ campaigns executed or supported by Washington often deploy terrorism as a mode of controlling violence⁵. The present study does not locate these two factors of terrorist studies, but I would like to intrigue into the literature produced after 9/11 attack thereby, investigating the said factors of terrorist studies on fiction published in the last decade.

⁴ George, A., ed., 1991. *Western State Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

⁵ Crelinsten, R., 2002. ‘Analysing Terrorism and Counter-terrorism: A Communication Model’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 14(2): 77–122.

Since September 11 attacks, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) was fought on many fronts, including the ideological war of words and images that rages on the cinema screens across the globe as well as the pages of popular fiction. Western cultural production since September 11 has remained deeply influenced by the events of that single fateful day. The Twin Towers have gone up in flames again and again in a plethora of textual and visual narratives like novels, short stories, films, documentaries and prose analyses. Representations of September 11 as a moment of global change became the 'ideological lynchpin' of the war on terror, a 'rhetorical construction' that promoted the idea of America as a victim and a defender of freedom, not only in its official discourse but also in the vast cultural production ranging from Hollywood films to the popular fiction and even photography. As David Holloway writes

From the very beginning, '9/11' and the 'war on terror' were so appropriated by storytelling and mythmaking that the events themselves became more or less indivisible from their representations, or simulations, in political rhetoric, mass media spectacle and the panoply of other representational forms that made the events feel pervasive at the time - films, novels, photographs, paintings, TV drama, specialist academic debates and other forms of public culture and war on terror kitsch⁶.

The deplorable simplifications perpetuated by the corporate media and makers and producers of the popular culture production need to be critically reflected in order to unravel the contexts and complexities of 9/11 and its tragic aftermaths.

The process of radical indoctrination has been explored in several post- 9/11 novels where the writers have attempted to explore the mindset of the 9/11 hijackers. However, none of the

⁶ Holloway, David. *9/11 and the War on Terror*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 5.

western writers have created a context large enough to include ordinary Muslims, who are the people who have various political and religious perspectives. Scanlan notes that after the 9/11 attacks, violent revolutionaries have created public terror that can be manipulated and multiplied by politicians, the press and literary writers. He says that the terms like Islamic terrorism and Islamic fascism were deliberately created and frequently repeated in the news media for the single objective of justifying many acts of discrimination against Muslims⁷. Such a violent image of Islam is not only reinforced by the popular films and television programmes but also by the post-9/11 novels written by some well-known American authors including Don DeLillo, John Updike and Sherman Alexie. At the same time, however, one must admit that there are other examples of popular fiction that refuse to tow the official discourse of war and terror. For example, Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), or Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), or Henri Rehr's *Tribeca Sunset*, and Alissa Torres's *American Widow*. Each of these narratives contests official accounts and re-inscribes counter or alternative discourses.

In the face of the scale of the events and their impact on the socio-political reality of the world, writers almost rushed to compete in all forms of writings including journalism and literary fiction. Post-9/11 era in general was a crisis for the fiction writers in the face of unfolding trauma and several works of arts quickly emerged to reflect on the changed realities of the world. A great number of prominent social theorists/philosophers including Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Zizek, Paul Virilio, Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida have also written about the politico-ideological implications of terrorism and the

⁷ Scanlan, Margaret. Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel after September 11, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46: 3 (2010), 266-27.

terrorist attacks in the U.S. They not only examined the overarching geopolitical implications of terrorism but also the governmental response to the new reality.

The aftershocks of the attacks continue to structure American political and cultural discourse, and as the chronological distance from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 increases, the number of politico-philosophical and literary discourses surrounding the event continues to multiply⁸.

However, serious creative reflections about the events of 9/11 have been few. This is due to an effective controlling structure of the corporate media to suppress and snub the dissenting voices. As Jacques Derrida has said:

9/11 introduces a deconstructive critique that is sober, alert, vigilant, attentive to everything that, through the best-substantiated strategy, the most justified politicking rhetoric, media powers, spontaneous or organized trends of opinion, welds the political to the metaphysical, to capitalistic speculation, to perversion of religious or nationalistic influence, to sovereigntist fantasy... Therein lies my interpretation of what should be what was named yesterday, according to the White House slogan, "infinite justice": to not exonerate oneself from one's own wrongs and the mistakes of one's own politics, even when one has just paid the most horrific and disproportionate price for it.⁹

Derrida's warning against the consequences of ignoring the causes of terrorism is as significant today as it was right after the 9/11 attacks. The imperial hubris that has been the

⁸ Marco Abel, Don DeLillo's 'In the Ruins of the Future': Literature, Images, and the Rhetoric of Seeing 9/11, PMLA, 118: 5 (2003), 1236-125.

⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Fichus*. Paris: Galilee, 2002, 51-52.

cause of horrific tragedies since 9/11 continues to threaten world peace and communal harmony. In the name of justice and freedom, many unjust wars have been started and civil liberties curtailed even in the U.S itself.

Martin Amis and John Updike are two notable writers who have echoed the same voice of America in same tone and pitch. "The Last Days of Muhammed Atta" by Martin Amis is a short story¹⁰. It is, however, a very important post-9/11 writing that sheds light on how opinion makers created their characters by partly incorporating current history. Amis, in this story imagines the last few days of the life of Muhammad Atta before he piloted a plane into the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. By outlining his conversation with Abdulaziz, his accomplice, the author attempts to depict the radicalized image of the terrorist and link it with his faith through his Sheikh, the Imam. The venue of their interactions is located in a camp near Kandahar in Afghanistan, chosen specifically and precisely to present a constructed conclusion that terrorism has a certain geographic identity too. Besides, the setting of the story, the development of the plot also merits attention. It moves along expected and familiar course that is typical of terrorism news flashed on the television screens every now and then. Although Amis does attempt to explain that his treatment of Islam as a religion is not inimical, but he sees Islam's transgressions as being excessively tolerated and wants the west to put some restriction on it. The larger message of Amis is that excessive tolerance of Islam in the West is a problem. What is significant about 'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta' is that the writer attempts to explore what is deep inside the mind of the would-be terrorist. Through the private musings of the protagonist, the writer has constructed the image of Islam as religion promoting fanaticism.

¹⁰ Martin Amis, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," available at <http://www.martinamisweb.com/documents/lastdayson>.

This story has an important analogy with the *Terrorist* (2006) by Updike in showing that the acts of suicide terrorism committed by the protagonists are necessarily inspired by the teachings of imams of the mosques. This cannot be considered a mere coincidence that the general trend in post-9/11 fiction and other art forms is to portray a western position on the issue of terrorism and essentially see the phenomenon of terrorism associated with the faith of Islam. There are thirty three verses of the Holy Quran and numerous references to other theological sources of Islam in the novel. Without any credible reason or rationale, Updike has quoted from the Quran, only to underline that the followers of the Quran are irrational and cannot listen to or understand common reasoning and human counselling. Most of the verses that Updike has gathered are about divine fury and anger at the infidels and sinful, thereby contributing to the general perception, as peddled by the American media, that Islam is another-worldly religion that relies on terror alone to convert people.

There are numerous novels, films, stories and other art productions in this regard revert and megaphone US policies on War on Terror. Terrorism critical studies have simply pointed out to replicate the US analysis or version of terror. On the other hand, another important feature of terrorism studies and also part post 9/11 fiction stands opposite of this particular argument. Either terrorism critical studies avoid all other socio-political interpretations of terrorism or condemn their critique on terror as ‘violent radicalization’ of the subject like the US does¹¹. The Oxford English Dictionary distinguishes between terror as the emotional state of being frightened, which is often attributed to a novel or tale of terror, and terrorism, or a system of terror, in which either a government rules by intimidation or a person or group adopts a policy of intimidation intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted. These latter two senses of terrorism are often invoked to justify the relativist argument that ‘one

¹¹ Jackson, Richard. ed., *Critical Terrorism Studies a New Research Agenda*. Abingdon: Routledge 2009. 22.

person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter'. But it is often very much cleared out that counter terrorism is not concerned or theorized under the term of terrorism and the US intervention to the several part of the world has been termed as War On Terror.

In this juncture, there are some writers of fiction who are engaged in a clarification campaign to protect Islam and Muslims. Muhsin Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is one example where he portrays a dramatic monologue of the protagonist, Changez Khan who destined to abandon his prestigious job in America and relieve into his own country, Pakistan as a victim of the terror discourse soon after the demolition Twin Towers. Changez is at the top of his class in Princeton and is picked up by a leading financial company in New York. He soon becomes the company's best trouble-shooter. His skill in reordering sick companies and turning them around moves his seniors to single him out to cut and prune staff and bring financial order into chaotic work places all over the world, from the Far East to Latin America. Later, Changez meets Erica while on holiday in Greece and is instantly attracted to her. Meanwhile, Erica confesses that she is still in love with her dead boyfriend and that she cannot get herself to forget him.

In the final movement of this narrative, Erica surrenders to her sickness and checks into a rehab centre. When Changez meets her there, he is shocked at how gaunt and sick she has become. He comes away shaken only to discover that she has vanished from the sanatorium - perhaps she is dead but no one knows for sure because her body is never found. By now, Changez has lost it as well: a nameless urge to find what is missing from his successful career, along with a deep homesickness for the innocent world of his youth, drives him to give up his job in America, return to Pakistan and start life over again as a college teacher.

In the novel, Hamid sought to counter the negative representation of Islam. Edward Said calls it a re-representation and a reactive counter- response.

The narrative depiction of Islam through the acts of terrorism, wars, deaths, fatwas , jihads or bombings sustains a Western sociological imagination of Islam but at the same token, it thrusts the Ummah , or the global Muslim community, into a constant struggle to re-represent Islam. Inevitably for 'many Muslims articulations on Islam is a reactive counter-response, for anything said about Islam gets more or less forced into the apologetic form of a statement about Islam's humanism, its contribution to civilization, development and moral righteousness.¹²

As the racial scenario changes in the wake of 9/11 attacks, Hamid's protagonist, Changez, faces debasing stereotypes based on religion and ethnicity. He is stripped of his illusions and enforced identity. A few days after the attacks, as he returns from Manila with his business team, on the airport he was separated from his colleagues at the immigration desk. "They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners"¹³. This is the moment when regression starts and any hidden/subconscious desire to see America harmed is entrenched in his conscious self. The transformation begins. His emergence into visibility for the wrong reasons makes him a locus of suspicion and discourse. As Changez informs his silent American listener:

America was gripped by a growing and self-righteous rage in those weeks of September and October as I cavorted... Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people's

¹² Said, Edward. *Covering Islam*. London: Vintage, 1997, 55.

¹³ Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Karachi: Oxford University Press. 2007, 44.

houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse.¹⁴

Suddenly a new identity, that of a terrorist or at least a terrorist-look-alike is imposed on the successful Princeton graduate and a brilliant business analyst for Underwood Samson's whose cardinal business principle is "Focus on the fundamentals." Ironically, Changez starts concentrating on another set of fundamentals which turns him into a reluctant fundamentalist and a hardliner. He confronts and suffers many unpleasant changes in American attitudes from the highest echelon to the public sphere.

Affronts were everywhere; the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment in history - not just from the government, but from the media and supposedly critical journalists as well - provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger.¹⁵

It is vital to inculcate terrorism and counterterrorism factors for a comprehensive analysis of terrorist discourse as the US continues to lead a worldwide 'war on terror' throughout the global South with profound consequences for the human security of population of the region. Furthermore, a critical study of terrorism and fiction should also work to expose the silences present in mainstream research, particularly regarding the terroristic nature of many aspects of the US-led and US-supported 'counterterrorist' policy.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵ Ibid., 101.

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