

Cultural Stereotyping & the Othering of Muslims in John Updike's *Terrorist*

Assist. Instructor Khamees Odah Ali

Directorate General of Education in Anbar, Ramadi, Iraq

khameesoda@gmail.com

Abstract :

This paper explores the textual process of cultural stereotyping in John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006). Being a response to 9\11 attacks and the 'war on terror' *Terrorist* Others Islam and Muslims as culturally negative stereotypes. Updike's stereotypical representation of Islam and Muslim might be (un)consciously structured by the media-disseminated negative stereotype of Islam and Muslims in the wake of 9\11 attacks. This paper examines critically the textual construction of the characters of American-Egyptian Ahmed Ashmawy in the novel in order to pin point the Othering process operative in the cultural stereotyping of Muslim Americans in this important 9\11 novel.

Keywords – Stereotyping, Othering, Representation, 9\11, Islam & Islamophobia

الصورة النمطية الثقافية وتغريب المسلم في رواية الارهابي لجون ابدايك

م.م. خميس عودة علي

المديرية العامة لتربية محافظة الانبار، الرمادي، العراق

الملخص:

يستجلي البحث ملامح بناء الصورة النمطية الثقافية للشخصيات المسلمة في رواية الارهابي (٢٠٠٦) للروائي الاميركي جون ابدايك. نظرا لكون هذه الرواية قد كتبت كرد فعل لأحداث الحادي عشر من ايلول وما تلاها من الحرب على الارهاب فان تغريب الشخصية المسلمة كصورة نمطية سلبية امر طبيعي في هكذا استجابة ادبية مؤدلجة. قد لا يكون هذا التتميط والتغريب مقصودا وربما يكون الكاتب قد تأثر بجو الكراهية والخوف من الاسلام الذي اسست له وسائل الاعلام الاميركية حينها لكن تبقى عملية بناء صورة المسلم في هذه الرواية مؤطر بايدولوجية الرهاب من الاسلام التي اعقبت احداث ايلول.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الصورة النمطية، التغريب، التمثيل النصي، الحادي عشر من ايلول، الاسلام ورهاب الإسلام).

1. INTRODUCTION

John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) is one of the first mature responses to the global 'war on terror' in the aftermath of 9\11 attacks. Updike spent some years studying Islam and the Holy Quran as preparation to write *Terrorist*. His goal is to understand terrorism in order to give his readers an insight into the mind and making of the 'Islamic' terrorist and to make his representation as realist as possible in the sense of being truthful to actual reality (Herman 692).

However, Updike fails to achieve these two goals. He fails because his Muslim characters are more stereotypes than being believable characters. This second aspect of *Terrorist* was duly recognized but not well-researched. Mohammad Shaaban Deyab, for instance, blames it all on the American media after 9\11 which popularized the Muslim as a negative stereotype. He states that *Terrorist* is "one example of how the US. Media may have played a negative role in shaping American writers' views of Islam and Muslims." (Deyab A220) Thus , "Upon publication, the novel constituted a comprehensive catalogue of negative stereotypes that American readers had already encountered in the context of the news" (220).

Aware of this charge, Updike tried to blame it all on the rigid orthodox nature of Islam. He explains that "Islam doesn't have as many shades of gray as the Christian or the Judaic faith does. It's fairly absolutist, as you know, and you're either in or not" (Qtd. in Deyab B 6). So, he justifies the stereotypical nature of his characterization of Muslim-Americans by charging Islam as a religion of fundamentalism. Updike's justification relates his cultural stereotyping to the concept of othering which underlies the Western perception of Muslims and Arabs. Othering here works through difference and exclusion on the basis of 'we' and 'them'. The 'Othered' is discursively constructed as the space where everything not 'us' is stigmatized. Thus, the process of othering fashion out-group perception and attitudes into formalized shape which is the

stereotype. Because stereotyping is essentially a distortion of reality it is constantly associated with biases, prejudices, discrimination.

2. STEREOTYPING & OTHERNESS

Stereotypes are negative and inaccurate images a certain community formulates of an alien Other. They encompass a set of features characteristic of a socially marginalized or excluded group and attending explanations of these features. Stereotypes are culturally specific and are often produced and disseminated on racial, ethnic, or gendered bases. Stereotyping as communal labelling works through imaging and judgements (Neculaesei, 2017, 207). Stereotyping is a cultural specific process because it often assume the form of a communally ready-made reaction to contextual situations such as social roles, group conflicts and power differences where Othering is at stake (Neculaesei, 2017, 207). Most often stereotyping operates as Othering because it is essentially a process of 'self-' and 'hetero-' identity construction. Self-stereotypes are positive because they label how the community perceives itself. Hetero-stereotypes are negative as they label how the community perceives the Other. The later type is cultural specific and displays the fears, anxieties, and hatred of the perceiving community of what it stereotypes as Othering (Neculaesei, 2017, 209).

Stereotyping is the cultural concretization of the exclusionary processes of Otherness since the latter stems from a differentiation of the self from the other on an identity platform. In his essay in the Encyclopedia of Human Geography Garth Myers highlights this issue:

The outside segment of the binaries—self/other and same/different—often is feared, loathed, or held as inferior. Thus, people often seek to expel, reject, abject, or exclude what is taken as other, outsider, or different, for instance, people who are out of place from where the mind's

prevailing order wants them. The term othering often is used for these exclusionary processes (345).

Post 9\11 American fiction builds its master narratives on this exclusionary process of the Other. It Others Muslims, and Muslim Americans in particular, by stereotyping them. Georgiana Banita finds the excessive Othering operative in much post-9/11 fiction simply distorting because it "divests the self of its innocence by recasting it as violent, condemnable, and abject through narratives that effectively block the path of self-exoneration and raise suspicions about the self's rhetorical reliability and coherence" (2012, 33).

3. STEREOTYPING & OTHERING OF MUSLIM CHARACTERS IN UPDIKE'S *TERRORIST*

This process of Othering is the basis of Updike's cultural stereotyping of Muslim-Americans in *Terrorist*, notably in the figure of Ahmed Ashmawy, the novel's central character. The portrayal of Ahmed as a Moslim adolescent is artificial and unconvincing.

Ahmed, the presumed terrorist of the title, portrayed as a terrorist in the making. He is represented as an impressionable adolescent who easily falls prey to terrorist groups. Ahmed is alienated from his American social milieu. He feels alien to this society because he sees his environment exclusively through the prism of his religion. His devotion turns him into a sort of a grotesque person incapable of living the reality of his world.

Updike is presenting a distorted image of Islam and Muslim. Islam is never is never a religion of extremes and fanaticism. The Quran and the Prophet's tradition make it clear that Islamic faith is a matter of behavior and humane treatment of people regardless of their faith. Ahmed as a Muslim departs greatly from this generous spirit of Islam. His distorted faith is exclusionary in the sense that he judges anyone outside

his faith to be an infidel, an insect that should be crushed by Godly orders. This is reflected in Ahmed's obsession with the idea that "These devils seek to take away my God." (Updike 4) He sees his religious integrity being endangered by the very culture he lives in. This is clearly reflected in Ahmed's repetition of his violent opinion that American culture is 'Godless'. Ahmed, for instance, makes this clear when he tells his school guidance councilor Jack Levy that because America:

has no God, it is obsessed with sex and luxury goods. Look at television, Mr. Levy, how it's always using sex to sell you things you don't need. Look at the history the school teaches, pure colonialist. Look how Christianity committed genocide on the Native Americans and undermined Asia and Africa and now is coming after Islam, with everything in Washington run by the Jews to keep themselves in Palestine.(Updike 36-7)

This clarifies that Ahmed's only motivation is sheer personal disgust and indignation with the obscenity and banality of contemporary American life. Ahmed's disgust is channeled through the strong element of Quranic Puritanism. He judges everything by using the Quranic yardstick literally. This is not "demonizing Muslim characters," as Mohammad Shaaban Deyab believes. (128) It is a failure of characterization rather than a case of deliberate misrepresentation. Ahmed is not a stereotypical character drawn from contemporary American media, which is motivated by Islamophobia. Although Updike intended "to show a deeply convinced religious personality, a person for reasons of his own, which I indicated in his life story, clings very deliberately to Islamic fundamentalism" (Interview with Louise Witt), he ended in producing an unconvincing cardboard character completely devoid of inner conflict and proper motivation to justify the atrocity of his suicidal mission. In short, Ahmed is inscribed as the alien Other of the contemporary American society.

Robert Boyers highlights Updike's failure to portray a real-to-life Islamic terrorist because "the boy has not the slightest misgiving or reluctance about the crime he is determined to commit, so that, for all of his earnestness and innocence, his scrupulous adherence to the teachings of his masters, his occasional eruptions of sexual desire and insecurity, he seems to us something of a monster"(89). So, Ahmed lacks sophistication and depth to make him credible representation of the terrorist in the making. Thus, Boyers contends that Ahmed as a terrorist is "a figure so simple and single-minded, a figure who is never indiscreet or tormented, whose faith is a rottenness of certitudes" (89). This is in effect is the result of fashioning Ahmed after the dominating cultural stereotyping of the Muslim as popularized by American media. Consequently, Ahmed is more a stereotype than a round character.

The absence of proper motivation on the part of Ahmed renders him a kind of a stereotypical abstraction rather than a real character with whom the reader can interact. Ahmad, according to the critic Francis Blessington, is "a hyphenated person" (123). This, according to Stephen Abell, makes Ahmed an "unnaturally reductive portrait" because the "relentlessness of Ahmad's piety is not contextualized by any other characteristics: he is allowed to stand for nothing other than his religion, is no more than a Muslim metonymy (TLS 2006).

Updike's stereotypical representation of the Muslim carries the Othering process to ideological extremes. Ahmed is Othered in a cultural context as the Muslims' desire to destroy America. In Ahmed's eyes, the world is fallen and the innocents are never innocent. "I look around me," he says, "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." (Updike 40) Slaves and devils occupy Ahmad's field of vision, never people. American s are nothing but devils and insects. The novel begins and ends with Ahmed's inner voice declaring his awareness of the

American conspiracy to take away his religion and God from him. And in many occasions he sees American as insects that should be crushed mercilessly. "Devils," the novel begins. "These devils seek to take away my God." (Updike 4) The possessive "my" is significant. It cast Ahmed as a relentless seeker of the Straight Path. He is obsessed with his faith to the degree of grotesqueness. It is his fanatical faith that sets him apart from the "devils" and "insects" around him.

Ahmed's image displays all the attributes of the stereotype. He is a fully indoctrinated robot right from the beginning of the novel. He is disastrously obsessed with paranoid fanaticism that does not fit Updike's contemporary social evil formula. His faith and subsequent fanaticism seem to alienate him from everyday reality. The artificial linguistic and religious mannerism he utters, his inability to think without recourse to the clichéd language of "infidels" and "devils," his outbreaks of hatred and rejection indicate that to him the world has lost its reality. This turns Ahmed into an ideological construct in order to demonize Muslims in the wake of 9\11.

4. CONCLUSION

Muslim characters are typified as negative cultural stereotypes in order to Other them as part of the ideologies of the Global War on Terror led by the United States and its Western allies. This process of Othering is meant to bring their Muslim faith with their American citizenship. The two are presented as incompatible as the faith seeks to erase the American way of life. Seen with the context of the 'war on terror' this ideologically-oriented stereotype is meant to further entrench the spirit of Islamophobia in American society. However, Updike might have not did this intentionally since his novel is produced in social context saturated with media-manufactured negative stereotype of Muslim in the wake of 9\11 attacks.

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