

## Differentiation and Imperfectionality in John Updike's *Terrorist*

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### ABSTRACT

*John Updike, one of America's eminent 20<sup>th</sup> century novelists, provides his own fictionalized presentation of the Muslim other within the American socio-cultural context in his 22<sup>nd</sup> novel, Terrorist. This novel is abundant with binary representations of Muslims whose acts and interactions with fellow Christian and Jewish Americans are scripted by their respective religious values. Updike's exemplifications of Islam and Muslims within the American context are investigated through the problematizing of Muslims' socio-cultural imperfections within the lens of orientalism and psychology of (im)perfection. Imperfectionalism as used in this paper refers to the inconsistent, unreliable and unpredictable characteristics that define the Muslim Other in comparison to mainstream American society. Using themes of 'religious differences,' 'differences between religions,' 'social differences,' 'gendered and exotic differences' and 'optimized differences,' Updike's Muslim characters are presented as flawed and faulty in their beliefs and conviction. In addition, Updike's representation of Islam rests on its blemishes including its disregard for self-improvement and modernity. Designs of orientalism and imperfection as seen in this novel frame the Muslim other as the imperfect version of the perfect non-Muslim American.*

*Keywords: 9/11; Muslims; American novel; differentiation; imperfectionality*

### INTRODUCTION

As the aftermath effect of 9/11, American authors have begun to mold their experiences as well as aptitudes to epitomize, either overtly or covertly, the attacks in their literary works (Zabihzadeh et al. 2017). In his 22<sup>nd</sup> novel, *Terrorist*, distinguished American novelist and man of letters, John Updike, seizes the tragic event of September 11, 2001 as his own conception of terrorism and its relation with Islam and Muslims. Uniquely, through a plot taking place two years after 9/11 within American society, Updike presents an imagined conspiracy against America by the Muslim other. Accordingly, Islam and Muslims are represented within the American social and cultural context through means of difference which juxtaposes Muslims against their Christian and Jew counterparts in terms of faith, social life, gendered and exotic attributes. Based on the context of 9/11 political ramifications and the accompanying rhetoric that surrounds its discourse, this paper sets out, firstly, to investigate Updike's construction of Islam, as a religion, in comparison with other religions in the American context. Secondly, we examine the means through which both Islam and Muslims are mediated within the American socio-cultural-religious contexts in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies abound on post-9/11 American literature, in general, and *Terrorist*, in particular. While some studies reveal the ethno-religious identities in *Terrorist*, like Mansutti's (2011), some have drawn on Edward Said's approach to Orientalist discourse and other postcolonial theorists such as Seyed Marandi and Zeinab Tari (2012) who have employed a contrapuntal reading of John Updike's *Terrorist* and DeLillo's *Falling Man* to examine their representations of Muslim women in the two novels. Furthermore, Ahmad Gamal (2011) has claimed that Updike's *Terrorist* and DeLillo's *Falling Man* have drawn profoundly on Orientalist worldview and stereotyping. However, Gamal has not illustrated Updike's persistent passive use of the Quran throughout *Terrorist* and his portrayal of the main character, Ahmad, as being greatly influenced by Islamic teachings.

By examining Updike's metatextuality of the transnational marriages in *Terrorist*, Riyadh Manqoush, Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Noraini Md. Yusof (2014a) conclude that Updike's portrayal of Muslims as intensely influenced by Islam has provoked them to reject the American liberal way of life. Riyadh Manqoush, Noraini Md. Yusof and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2014b) acknowledge that Updike has employed verbal irony, dramatic irony and situational irony to reiterate specific personal views as exemplified in Updike's sarcasm of Muslims' appreciation of the headscarf as a symbol of being a good Muslim. Through the use of irony, Updike, as the article concludes, has oversimplified the representation and significance of Muslims' rituals (Manqoush et al. 2014b). Updike's *Terrorist* has been also demonstrated as a neo-Orientalist work with regard to its representation of the Muslim other (Arif & Ahmad 2016; Mirzayee et al. 2017). In these previous studies, Updike's representation of the socio-cultural sensibilities of Islam and the Muslim other in the American society have not been problematized sufficiently to show how the Muslim characters appear to validate their acts of terror based on the teachings of their religion.

In the months following the 9/11 attacks, the contention from the United States authorities led by the then President, George W. Bush, reiterated a thriving rhetoric of fear from Islam and Muslims (Bush 2001). Lori Peek's (2011) seminal work on the backlash of the 9/11 attacks on the Muslim population in America highlights the continued demonizing that Islam and Muslims suffered. Likewise, Ron Geaves and Theodore Gabriel (2004) in the introduction to the book, *Islam and the West Post 9/11*, categorically addressed what Muslims in the world were fearful of – are Islam and the Muslims the “new enemy of the West”? (Geaves & Gabriel 2004, p. 5). The profiling of Muslims and Islam as “evil” and the “enemy” signify the “imperfections” which permeate the faith and its followers as perceived by anti-Muslim rhetoric. Taking the discussion from the politics of orientalism and the psychology of perfectionism, this paper problematizes Updike's means of differentiating both Islam and Muslims in his novel, a trajectory that marks our departure from previous research findings.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Following 9/11, Western media reworks old Orientalist images of the Muslim other, however, by new means. Thus, after bearing the metaphor of antiquity, and sometimes mystery, the Oriental has evolved into a framework of difference. Muslims are shown to be objects of suspicion “unless they could prove themselves innocent of either being terrorists or sympathising with terrorists” (Abrahamian 2003, p. 538). American post-9/11 representations of the Muslim other are heavily built on the long-established Western knowledge about the Orient, and Orientalism, which has served as the foundational rationale behind presenting the

Muslim as America's as well as the West's other. Furthermore, in the post-9/11 era, Orientalism still seems to overwhelm Western perceptions as well as representations of the Orient (Little 2002, Said 2003, Gregory 2004, Kalin 2004, Smith 2006, Kumar 2012). It is still, as Andrea Smith (2006) contends, an essential pillar of Western supremacy and remains a perennial mindset about the East.

Orientalism, as argued by Edward Said (1979), is the language used in the West in order to characterize the East. Where the Muslim Orient "used to [be] admire[d]" for "Islam's lessons of humility and submission to the sublime power of Providence", current state of "hard orientalism of uncompromising Islamophobia" situates the Muslim beyond the "romantic soft" orientalism (Kalmar 2012, p. 8). Up to the present day, Orientalism is being reestablished mostly with the exaggerated fear of the Orient as well as the Orient's definite association with terrorism (Kumar 2012).

By means of the long-established Western perceptions of the Oriental despotism (Curtis 2009), Islam and Muslims have undergone a process of differentiation from their Christian Western counterparts, and the former vilified as the corrupted versions of the civilized and 'god-fearing' West. As Ivan Kalmar (2012, p. 4) aptly summed it: "Fundamentally, orientalism takes a deep-seated and universal existential question – the goodness or otherwise of the powers that controls us – and tries to solve it by opposing a Christian West to a Muslim East." This "imaginative geography of division and opposition" is also rooted in the unsaid psychology of perfection in which the East is subjected with "the projection of fears and weakness" of the West (p. 5). The dichotomy of the East and West is further personified, according to Kalmar, to connote the "concrete examples of two contrasting types of being human, in relation to other humans and to the universe." (p. 5). Thus the godly, 'caring' and 'loving' West is contrasted to the ungodly, 'heartless' and 'vengeful' East.

This dichotomy can be further expanded to problematize the psychology of perfectionism that marks the discourse of Orientalism. The three forms of perfectionism as described by Hewitt and Flett (1991, 2004) -- "self-oriented, other-oriented and socially prescribed" (Stoeber 2018, p. 5) are key in the current state of Islamophobia where the other is marginalized and stigmatized beyond being 'the feared'. The other, i.e. the Muslim other, is now viewed from a binary of good and evil. The discourse of good and evil is presented from the lens of perfectionism, and the unspoken (im)perfectionism where the former is portrayed as perfect based on their choice of "values and beliefs" that dictate their life choices. By default, the other, due to its lack of shared "values and beliefs" with the dominant group, is deemed as imperfect.

Within the post 9/11 American landscape when American Muslims of Arabs, Indians or Turks descent are portrayed, they are primarily presented with their difference and abnormality from the ordinary and normal mainstream society. Hence, the Muslim becomes the flawed Other of the all-good and "perfect" West. Factually, Muslims, in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, have become more denigrated with their evident difference and faults so as to pave the way for subsequent colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as endorsing the long-established Israeli colonialism of Palestine.

In this paper, the Muslim characters as well as pertaining incidents where Islam and Muslims are involved will be examined and deliberated. The analysis will be built on five levels, specifically, "religious differences," "differences between religions," "social differences," "gendered and exotic differences" and "optimized differences." While "religious differences," as a construct, is concerned with differences resulting from Islam's influence on Muslims, "differences between religions," integrates the means by which Islam, per se, is differentiated from other religions. The aspect of "social differences" is an examination of social differences associated with Muslims in the narrative, whereas,

“gendered and exotic differences” show how male Muslims have been presented by means of their female-like as well as exotic attributes. Finally, “optimized differences,” as a construct, is meant to investigate the implications and indications of presenting some Muslim characters positively in Updike’s novel.

## ANALYSIS

In this section, Updike’s representation of Islam and Muslims is analyzed within five categories; “religious differences,” “differences between religions,” “social differences,” “gendered and exotic differences” and “optimized differences.” Each aspect draws on examples as illustrated in the novel. The combined types give us insights into the ways in which the novelist persuades his readers to sympathize with his point of view.

### RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

Islam in *Terrorist* has been illustrated as a differentiating factor behind Muslims’ passive qualities. Hence, in order to accentuate the religiously grounded differences between the two opposed as well as dissimilar ‘entities,’ Islam and Christianity, Updike has employed both Quranic and biblical quotations to further this argument. Hence, Hermione responds to the Secretary’s loud contemplations about the motives behind attacking America, “They hate the light,” Hermione tells him loyally. “Like cockroaches. Like bats. *The light shone in darkness,*” she quotes, knowing that Pennsylvania piety is a way to his heart, “*and the darkness comprehended it not*” [Author’s Emphasis] (Updike 2006, p. 48). While Updike quotes the Gospel of John from the Bible (the words in italics) to emphasize ‘Christian’ Americans’ love for the light while, he concurrently, quotes a verse from the holy Quran so as to demonstrate what he considers to be an evidence of how Muslims are requested to hate this life, “[t]he unbelievers love this fleeting life too well” (p. 48), which is quoted as one of the most recurrent verses in “the internet chatter” (p. 48). Clearly, Updike has utilized a misinterpreted Quranic verse to confirm what he believes to be an evident proof of Muslims’ hate for this life, and love for death, while he has used a biblical excerpt to demonstrate how Christians seek light or bright life. Such contrast serves to emphasize the difference between the two religions, Islam and Christianity, as well as the difference in behavior of the followers, Muslims and Christians. Evidently, Islam is differentiated from Christianity with clear cut disparity as between darkness and light, hate and love, and life and death to ascribe a vilified stance of an imperfect religion (See Kalmar 2012 above).

An imperative evidence of Islam’s ‘imperfection’ as seen in western fiction can be traced to the construct of the ‘terrorist’ and what he/she stands for. As a point of comparison, in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* the terrorist character, albeit non-Muslim, declares a statement that has become quintessential to the Orientalist depiction of the Muslim terrorist. As he declares, “[t]hey depend on life [. . .] whereas I depend on death” (Conrad 1920, p. 95). The faulty mindset of the Muslim is profiled to hate life and be willing to die for one’s faith. And this is the most recurrent motif in *Terrorist*, where Muslims are depicted as abhorring this life and instead, striving for the afterlife under the influence of their religion. Correspondingly, Ahmad argues with Joryleen that, “the human spirit asks for *self-denial*. It longs to say ‘No’ to the physical world,” and she retorts, “[y]ou *scare* me when you talk like that. It sounds like *you hate life*” [Emphasis Added] (Updike 2006, p. 72). Ahmad’s “self-denial” is not that positive human trait which makes people give priority to helping others on their own expense. Rather, Ahmad’s response is a negative one that leads him to terminate his own life in addition to others in an act of terrorism. Yet, Ahmad’s inconsistent and

unreliable tendencies of speaking about self-denial while committing acts of fornication reiterates Updike's construction of the imperfect Muslim whose fundamental values and beliefs are flawed and weak. Terrorism, viewed as an exclusively 'Islamic' "shortcut" to Paradise (p.240), and to "God's warm welcome" (p. 248) smears the religion of Islam for its inhumane tendencies. Consequently, when the Muslim other reaches the highest degree of difference and dissimilarity with the Christian American self, i.e., becomes imperfect, the highest degree of enmity towards the latter will be the natural result.

Muslims' faulty and unreliable characteristics are further expanded in this narrative through Ahmad's religious superiority complex, which prevents him from detecting the existing of common ground shared by all human beings. It is the only differentiating factor that makes Ahmad think of all non-Muslims similarly and makes him categorize them as 'infidels'. Ahmad 'imperfections' lie in his contemptuous attitude towards all non-Muslims in his immediate circle who he categorizes as either "weak Christians" or "nonobservant Jews" (Updike 2006, p. 3). His character flaw, dictated by his religious beliefs extends to his interpersonal relationships when he declares that his mother, a Christian, and Levy, a Jew, as "infidel animals" (p. 94) because they "are not on the Straight Path" (p. 3). Through Ahmad's celebrated Islamic-religious superiority, Updike has tried to generate an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy which is employed to assign Ahmad himself an imperfect status as an arrogant bigot. Additionally, Ahmad's behavior is also intended to reflect his inability to integrate within the American society despite the fact that he has been born in America and has never been abroad. For Updike, what separates Ahmad and generates such a distance between him and other Americans is Ahmad's religion, Islam.

As exemplified in Ahmad, Islam has a sturdy, nonetheless, passive influence on its followers as it turns them into obedient, rather than "enterpris[ing]" beings (Updike 2006, p. 184). In view of that, though Ahmad has "ample abilities" (p. 184), accentuated more than once by Levy, Ahmad does not utilize such abilities in a flourishing way as he,

has no plan: the God attached to him like an invisible twin, his other self, is a God not of enterprise but of *submission*[. . .] [T]he Merciful and Compassionate has illuminated no straight path into a vocation. It is as if in the delicious sleep of his devotion to Allah *his future* has been *amputated* [Emphasis added]. (p. 184)

For Updike, Ahmad's total submission to God has led him to such an aimless passivity which has almost driven him to a perilous end, as illustrated in his terrorist endeavor. Ahmad's submission is rather a robot-like obedience which prevents him from having a real future but rather such an "amputated" one. Furthermore, Islam's submissive impact prevents Ahmad from having any positive attempt that might benefit him and his society. For Updike, submission in Islam is a counter-intellectual faculty that molds Muslims into hopeless bigots or terrorists. Hence, Islam is differentiated from both Christianity and Judaism as the only religion with such a disastrous influence on its followers akin to the binary of the "caring and loving God-the-father" against the "vengeful, selfish" Muslim god portrayed in early orientalism discourse. (Kalmar 2012, p. 5).

By means of illustrating Muslims' contempt and disrespect for non-Muslims' beliefs and rites, Updike differentiates Muslims and presents them as the intolerant other who is not able to co-exist with non-Muslims. Hence, while in church to hear Joryleen, a classmate, chanting with the church chorus, Ahmad examines the surroundings with contempt. He ponders, "[n]ow African-American congregants bring their disheveled, shouting religion [. . .] in a rhythmical rapture as illusory as (Shaikh Rashid sardonically puts forward the analogy) the shuffling, mumbling trance of Brazilian candomblé" (Updike 2006, p. 15). For Ahmad and Shaikh Rashid, Christianity, as practiced in churches, is a mere rhythmic chanting filled with deception and delusion; it is more of a pagan-like rites performed in a place filled with

idols; “black unbelievers at worship of their non-God, their three-headed idol” (p. 62). Ahmad and Shaikh Rashid’s mocking of Christians at churches is meant to show their character flaw of religious intolerance and disrespect. In locating Ahmad and his mentor within the discourse of hatred and contempt towards other religions, Updike frames his narrative in the polemic of othering where Islam is assigned a differentiated space, and consequently, accused of being unable to co-exist with other religions. The narrative in so doing positions Christianity and Judaism as peace-loving religions that can co-existence within the American climate of religious diversity.

The inconsistency and unreliability of Islam as a religion that promotes multi-religious co-existence is perpetuated in this narrative. For instance, despite the fact that Ahmad’s, “religion keeps him from drugs and vice [. . .], it also holds him rather aloof from his classmates and the studies on the curriculum” (Updike 2006, p. 8). In the school, Ahmad is isolated from other students as if he has built a wall against any attempt to engage him in. Therefore, Joryleen, a classmate, tells him that he, “should learn to smile more” (p. 8). Accordingly, Islam is the estranging factor which prevents Ahmad from integrating with other students and having normal relationships. Unmistakably, Islam is differentiated from other religions such as Christianity and Judaism. For Updike, Islam is the pacemaker of Ahmad’s life; it is the most powerful, though negative, authority in his life. Accordingly, Islam is not only a religion, but also an imperfect way of life as projected in Ahmad’s deeds.

Through Ahmad’s character, Updike tries to lay emphasis on his conception of the American superiority as well as Muslims’ inferiority. Therefore, when Ahmad introduces his parents to Jack Levy, the school counselor, he begins with his mother; “I am the product of a white American mother and an Egyptian exchange student” (Updike 2006, p. 8). What seems to be a contradiction between Ahmad’s feeling of superiority for being the product of a white American woman and, at the same time, being arrogant as a Muslim and contemptuous for all non-Muslim Americans is meant to reflect twofold facets of Ahmad’s faulty and flawed sense of Self informed largely by his ‘imperfect’ beliefs. On the one hand, Ahmad is depicted to recognize the almost all-inclusive American (white) supremacy; on the other hand, he believes in the superiority of Islam, which dictates his contemptible manners towards his white ‘infidel’ mother. Updike presents Ahmad in such contradictory manner signaling the Muslims’ imperfections and religious culpabilities.

This theme is further expanded in the representation of the Jewish character, Jacob Levy. During the course of the novel, Levy’s life has been narrated in parallel with Ahmad’s life. The two characters’ lives have been recounted, however, within a contrastive framework between the two different religions of the characters and the religions’ influence on each character. On one hand, Levy is,

[. . .] a Jew. But not a proud Jew, wrapped in the ancient covenant. His grandfather *had shed all religion in the New World*, putting his faith in a *revolutionized society*, a world where the powerful could no longer rule through *superstition*, where food on the table, decent housing and shelter, *replaced the untrustworthy promises of an unseen God*”  
[Emphasis added] (Updike 2006, pp. 23-24)

Furthermore, Levy who, “had encouraged the world to make “Jack” of “Jacob” and had argued against his son's circumcision” (p. 24), is accordingly the modernized American citizen who has replaced old religious ‘superstitions’ with a modernized conception of the world. Contrarily, Ahmad, the Muslim American, is presented with his faulty inability to modernize, revolutionize his traditional beliefs and cope with American multicultural modernity. Additionally, while, Levy has abandoned “untrustworthy promises of an unseen God” long ago through his grandfathers (p. 24), Ahmad is still the prisoner of his blemished traditional fantasies of Eden’s “dark-eyed houris” and “fruits” (p. 5). Within the politics of

orientalism, Islam, as a religion, is positioned as static and incompatible with modernity and progress (Said 1979). Likewise, the Oriental himself is a fixed entity who does not have the faculty to develop or change. Evidently, Updike has reiterated what he considers to be the absolute differences between Muslims and Jews as well as between Islam and Judaism, as religions. For him, only Muslims are still stunted by their religion while Christians and Jews have long adopted their modernized versions of their more tolerant religions.

The imperfection of Islam is further delineated in this novel within its incompatibility with the knowledge of the sciences through Ahmad's myopic understanding. Ahmad views his teachers as "paid to instill" "Godless" values such as "biology and chemistry and physics" (Updike 2006, p. 4). He criticizes these teachers for their dependence on measurement as the only method for deducing truth and that, "[t]he rest is the passing dream that we call ourselves" (p. 4). Ahmad's blinkered belief in Islam is manifested in his opinion that all other knowledge unrelated to Islamic theology is spiritless and lacking in truth. Updike's portrayal of the Muslim Other as scientifically illogical and regressive further demonstrates the imperfections placed on the religion. Accordingly, Islam is represented in this novel as a religion that rejects science and relies solely on unverified revelations. Evidently, Islam is differentiated from other religions and reserved in an othered space of imperfectionality.

Thus, Islamic 'imperfection' portrayed in *Terrorist* signals the real obstacle in Muslims' advancement and prosperity, a flawed worldview of what is important. For example, when Levy questions Ahmad about his determination to quit the academic track, Ahmad advocates his decision by restating Shaikh Rashid's advice that, "the college track exposed me [Ahmad] to *corrupting influences*—bad philosophy and bad literature. Western culture is Godless" [Emphasis added] (Updike 2006, p. 38). Shaikh Rashid mirrors the flawed and faulty "oriental despot ... who takes everything from his subjects and gives them nothing." (Kalmar 2012, p. 15) Shaikh Rashid believes that exposing Ahmad to academic reasoning would weaken Ahmad's convictions and might lead him to abandon Islam. His poor opinion of Ahmad's religious conviction adds to the imperfection of Islam, as Updike presents it. Additionally, as Levy suggests that "'more education,'" after high school, would be better for Ahmad's future. However, Ahmad fears that more education "might weaken his faith. Doubts he had held off in high school might become irresistible in college. The Straight Path was taking him in another, purer direction" (p. 216). Clearly, for Updike, Islam has an imperfect influence on Muslims as illustrated in Ahmad's case.

#### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RELIGIONS

In *Terrorist*, like Muslims, Islam has been differentiated from other religions. Islam, as a religion, has been illustrated as built on mythical tenets. Thus, despite the fact that Ahmad is portrayed as an Islamic bigot (Wood 2006), every now and then, he has his own doubts about Islam. He wonders, "[i]f there is a next" life (Updike 2006, p. 5), or, if it is possible to maintain "Hell's boilers" and to feed the "dark-eyed houris" in "Eden" (p. 5). Moreover, he questions the basis of all knowledge he has about Islam and the "evidence beyond the Prophet's blazing and divinely inspired words," as he doubts, by "an inner devil," the existence of such a proof (p. 5). Clearly, Islam, for Updike, does not provide a sound rationale since it is built on myths as exemplified in the story of Prophet Mohammad's journey to Heaven. Correspondingly, Shaikh Rashid, Ahmad's radical imam, confirms the fact that "such things happen" though "unbelievable" as shown in the "sacred tradition of Hadith" (p. 5). Evidently, Islam is presented as a religion based on myths and superstitions while Muslims are represented as simple-minded followers who depend mainly on old scripts, rather than critical thinking, to vindicate their beliefs. Questioning Updike's claimed

desire “to treat Islam sympathetically” in *Terrorist*, James Wood (2006) wonders how Updike could be sympathetic with Islam while using a “solemn robot” Ahmad to represent it?

In fact, when the culture is differentiated, “[t]he Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment. Narrative and the cultural politics of difference become the closed circle of interpretation” (Bhabha 1994, p. 31). Thus the other becomes the passive object of recurring representative and interpretative acts in which each form of interpretation signifies the other; moreover, the other is narrated and assigned specific borders he/she cannot override. Difference enables cultures to express their exceptionality and distinctiveness through constructing cultural patterns of the other, such as literature, in which these other cultures are diminished, distorted and dehumanized so as to be managed, controlled and administered (Bhabha 1994).

Drawing on an old Orientalist claim that Islam is a false religion (Said 1979), Updike questions the validity and authenticity of the Quran, the main Islamic holy text. Hence, Ahmad asks his imam, “are you suggesting that the version available to us, fixed by the first caliphs within twenty years of the Prophet's death, is somehow imperfect, compared with the version that is eternal?” (Updike 2006, p. 104), and Shaikh Rashid answers, “[t]he imperfections must lie within ourselves—in our ignorance, and in the records that the first disciples and scribes made of the Prophet's utterances” (pp. 104-105). Correspondingly, Updike hints to the fictional status of the stories mentioned in Quran when Shaikh Rashid illustrates that, “[o]ne presumes that the flocks of birds are a *metaphor* for some sort of missiles hurled by catapult, or else we have the *ungainly vision* of winged creatures, less formidable than the Roc of *The Thousand and One Nights* [. . .]” [Emphasis added] (p. 105). Accordingly, the Quranic story of Abrahah is illuminated as a fictional work of art, rather than an authentic one, and connected, instead, to one of the most principal literary works that have shaped western perceptions of the Oriental, *The Thousand and One Nights*. Such a claim, that the Quran is a literary work, is further reinforced as the imam explains, “[t]hough he spurned the title of poet, the Prophet, especially in these early Meccan verses, achieved intricate effects” (p. 105). Clearly, Updike is hinting to the Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) being the author of the Quran, not God, by referring to the poetic effect of the Prophet's talent in the “Meccan verses” (p. 105). Updike thus frames the Quran, the core scripture of Islam, within unrealistic, fictional and imperfect narratives authored by a poet who has claimed to be a prophet.

The blemishes in Islam are further illuminated in this narrative when the Quran is shown to further confuse Ahmad as he tries to comprehend it (Updike 2006). The more Shaikh Rashid goes through details to explain some stories in the Quran to Ahmad, the more Ahmad, “feels an abyss is opening within him, a chasm of the problematical and inaccessibly ancient” (p. 106). So as to reiterate the metaphoric nature of the Quran, Shaikh Rashid reminds Ahmad that, “the houris are *metaphors*” [Emphasis added] (p. 107). Thus, Ahmad feels more confused, therefore, he retorts, “[b]ut Paradise must be real, a real place” (p. 107). Therefore, when encountered only with fictional realms, frustrated Ahmad tries to grasp a truth which may help him to build on his other uncertain beliefs. Through Ahmad's internal struggle against his doubts as well as his shaking belief, Updike presents Islam as contradictory and flawed.

Elsewhere, when Ahmad weighs his imam's words about the unbelievers' lack of “feelings” (Updike 2006, p. 77), Updike's narrator interferes in order to reiterate the fact that “it was not Ahmad's role to argue; it was his to learn, to submit to his own place in Islam's vast structure, visible and invisible” (p. 77) [Emphasis added]. For Updike, the Muslim god is a despotic figure (Kalmar 2012, p. 15) who obliges Muslims to passively submit and prevents its followers from reasoning and thinking critically as it forces its ‘unreasonable’ teachings and believes under Muslims' doctrine of absolute submission to God's will. Accordingly,



Islam offers a flawed and imperfect one direction approach to knowledge and to all other aspects of life.

Additionally, Updike illustrates Ahmad's inconceivable idea of the religious supremacy of Islam, as he, Ahmad, feels that all religions, except Islam, are "grotesquely mistaken and corrupt" and wonders why Allah does not guide those non-Muslims to "the Strait Path" (Updike 2006, p. 17). At this junction, Updike, introduces Jack Levy, the Jewish school guidance counselor, as the rational self-criticizing American who questions the very possibility of "any right path?" (p. 22). In view of that, the rational non-Muslim is presented in contrast with the irrational and arrogant Muslim so as to accentuate Islam's imperfections, backwardness and immoderateness.

#### SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

As demonstrated in *Terrorist*, Updike's exemplifications of the social differences between Muslims and non-Muslims have been further reiterated. Accordingly, Updike has also tried to highlight these social differences through Muslim and non-Muslim characters. Thus, on one hand, Jack Levy, the American Jew, has been married to Beth, the German-American Lutheran, for thirty-six years. Additionally, Jack Levy and Beth are still, "together in northern New Jersey, the two of them *with their different faiths and ethnicities* have been ground down to a lackluster sameness" [Emphasis added] (Updike 2006, p. 25). On the other hand, Ahmad's father, the Egyptian exchange student has known that, "marrying an American citizen, however *trashy* and *immoral* she was, would gain him American citizenship [. . .] Having *despaired of ever earning* more than a *menial* living by the time I [Ahmad] *was three, he decamped*" [Emphasis added] (p. 35). After thirty-six years, Levy is still committed to his family while Omar Ashmawy, Ahmad's father, who married an American woman in order to earn the American nationality, could not take responsibility as he has left the family when his son, Ahmad, needed him most at the age of three. Moreover, while Levy, in his sixties, is still working vigorously at High School Central, Ashmawy has failed to earn "more than a menial living" (p.35), while still young. Such contrast, between the non-Muslim and Muslim characters, further illustrate the politics of orientalism and psychology of (im)perfectionism imposed on the Muslim other as a lazy and dependent opportunist.

Homi Bhabha (1994) contends that the process of identification necessarily entangles acts of differentiation. To attribute otherness to those who differ from the self is to assert your identity; the other is needed to define the self. Bhabha adds,

The image is only ever an appurtenance to authority and identity; it must never be read mimetically as the appearance of a reality. The access to the image of identity is only ever possible in the negation of any sense of originality or plenitude; the process of displacement and differentiation (absence/presence, representation/ repetition) renders it a liminal reality. The image is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence, and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss. (p. 51)

Such interaction between authority and identity, which inevitably entails a "process" of differentiation, produces a rather distorted representation of the other; consequently, representations of other cultures do not provide a 'real' image of those cultures, in the contrary, they replace and negate the very essence of that image.

Correspondingly, Updike draws on the differences between Ahmad's parents. As discussed earlier, more of an Oriental piece of antique, Ahmad introduces himself as "the *product* of a white American mother and an Egyptian exchange student" [Emphasis added] (Updike 2006, p. 34). Additionally, Ahmad relates the story of his striving American mother who works as a nurse aide, "paints and designs jewelry in spare time, with some success", to

support him, however, when Ahmad starts to talk about his father he, “hesitates, as if he has encountered an obstacle in his throat” (p. 35). Evidently, in the persons of Ahmad’s American mother and his Arab father, Updike has tried to show the difference between the successful American mother and a failing Arab father.

Furthermore, Ahmad’s father, Omar, has also been a Muslim subject of imperfection in contrast to Jack Levy. Omar is depicted as a careless and disloyal husband whose marriage is rooted in his selfish gains of the American nationality, while Levy is positioned as the loyal husband, whose wife, “knows he will never leave her: his Jewish sense of responsibility and a sentimental loyalty, which must be Jewish too” (Updike 2006, p. 122). While Levy is presented as the responsible husband who respects his wife and takes care of her despite the fact that he does not like her being so obese, Omar, is portrayed as an inadequate Muslim husband whose religious values permits him to treat his wife as a servant; “A woman should serve a man” (p. 86). Clearly, Omar is differentiated as an undependable husband, Jack’s opposite, who is not able to shoulder responsibilities and duties. By reiterating Muslims’ difference from non-Muslims, their imperfectionality is made evident and their antagonism is more emphasized.

#### GENDERED AND EXOTIC DIFFERENCES

In *Terrorist*, the Arab is still that more-feminized Oriental, whose appearance still has the imaginative magic and mystery-like atmosphere. Hence, Levy tells Ahmad, ““Your name is interesting,”” (Updike 2006, p. 34). The narrator recounts, “[t]here is *something Levy likes* about the kid—an *unblinking gravity*, a *wary courtesy* in the set of his *soft*, rather *full lips* and the *careful cut* and combing of his hair [. . .]” [Emphasis added] (p. 34). Unmistakably, Ahmad is drawn as an object with an interesting halo. Beginning with his name, Ahmad Ashmawy, to the description of his physical appearance, Levy seems to be enchanted by Ahmad as if by a charming coy virgin with her feminine qualities, “unblinking gravity” and “wary courtesy” (p. 34), in addition to sensuality (“soft” “full lips”). What Levy likes about Ahmad is his more-female-like physical appearance rather than his personal traits. Manifestly, Ahmad is exoticized to be the Oriental site of Western curiosity and inspection as well, however, these more female-like traits turn to be a cover under which hides a human bomb.

Additionally, so as to confirm the danger underneath Ahmad’s feminine traits, the narrator recounts that Ahmad, “has a sense of himself, his long limbs *bare*, as *beautiful*, *beauty* being an affront to *the brutes of the world*” [Emphasis added] (Updike 2006, p. 97). While Ahmad is aware of his feminized qualities, “beauty,” he also realizes that he does not have the masculine physical strength in order to defend himself when bullied by other male students. Ahmad epitomizes the imperfect feminized Oriental whose lack of appropriate physical strength as well as his cowardice make him, consequently, more aggressive against all other students and later, a real terrorist.

For Orientalists, the Orient is the subject and space whose value does not come from its human qualities but rather from its museum-like standing. The Orient is more of an object than a subject; he is to be examined, admired and possessed. Hence, Omar, Ahmad’s father, is presented as an Oriental site, “whose ancestors had been baked since the time of the Pharaohs in the muddy rice and flax fields of the overflowing Nile” (Updike 2006, p.13). However, if not presented with his passive Oriental traits, Omar is presented as “exotic, third-world” and “handsome” (pp. 86-87). Even when partially humanized, the male Oriental in *Terrorist* is more feminized. Hence, Teresa goes on describing Omar,

He sounded so *refined*. And always tidy, shining his shoes, combing his hair. Thick jet-black hair like you never see on an American, a little curl behind die ears and at the neck,

and of course his skin, so *smooth* and even, darker than Ahmad's but perfectly matte, like a cloth that's been dipped, olive-beige with a pinch of lampblack in it, but it didn't come off on your hand [Emphasis added]. (p. 90)

The same way Ahmad's Oriental physical features have been the source of Jack's attention and admiration, Omar's also have attracted Teresa and made her marry him. Like Ahmad, Omar has been passively feminized with his refined as well as smooth appearance. The way Omar has been described is more of an ancient Oriental painting whose richness lies in its passive state on the wall of some museum. As he fails to achieve any success either in making money to support his family, as a "clueless loser" (p. 89), or in driving, as a "hopeless driver" (p. 90), he is assigned a damaged status.

#### OPTIMIZED DIFFERENCES

Though mostly about the radicalized Muslim, *Terrorist* has also presented another Oriental character, Charlie Chehab whose status as the 'good' Muslim who has been "enamored of George Washington" (Updike 2006, p. 180) and who served as an FBI undercover before being slaughtered by terrorists at the end of the narrative. As one of the major characters, Charlie has risked his own life for America's well-being by playing an important role in exposing the terrorist plot to explode Lincoln Tunnel. He is valorized as an American hero who "died for his country" (p. 291). Nonetheless, Charlie's strength of character lies in being more American and less Muslim.

Charlie is described as not being "all that observant" of a Muslim (Updike 2006, p. 165), who frequently uses American vulgar slang words, watches a lot of movies, commercials and other popular American TV shows (p. 171) and is brazen about seeking the services of a prostitute for Ahmad (p. 217). Thus, what makes Charlie a good American citizen, is primarily his being 'Charlie,' the American. As Peter Herman (2015, p. 708) contends that, "Updike drops occasional hints that Charlie is more American than jihadist." Although Charlie is shown to have heated arguments against America in general, it is a front to gain Ahmad's trust and confidence in order to uncover his terrorist intentions.

Throughout *Terrorist*, it is not difficult to recognize Updike's contrastive portrayal of the Muslim and non-Muslim characters. Differences between the two different categories have been demonstrated in characters as well as religions. While the Jewish and Christian characters have been generally depicted positively, Muslim characters have been depicted antithetically in general. The only Muslim characters that have been presented in a positive way are the Lebanese-American family members, the Chehabs, however, within their more American-like life-style and convictions. Likewise, Islam, as a religion, has been presented either as a differentiating agent, for Muslims, or has been differentiated, as a religion, per se. Through Updike's illustration of Islam and Muslims' difference from their counterparts, their shortcomings are accentuated.

#### CONCLUSION

In *Terrorist*, both Islam and Muslims have been illustrated within a framework of differentiation. Persistent contrast between Islam, Christianity and Judaism have been illustrated throughout the novel so as to present Islam as the only religion that still has robust passive impact on its followers. Islam, as a religion, has been both drawn in parochial perspective and assigned a differentiated status. In addition to their being socially othered in *Terrorist*, male Muslims have been also presented with their feminized and exotic characteristics. Despite the fact that *Terrorist* has incorporated some positively depicted

Muslim characters, these Muslims are assigned American-like lifestyle and beliefs. It is within this literary space that we can see clearly that Americans with other beliefs and way of life are viewed through myopic lens because they fail to adhere to mainstream society. Clearly, Islam is shown as an imperfect religion when compared to other religions. Similarly, the Muslim American is presented as an imperfect version of other non-Muslim Americans. In fact, Updike's representation of Islam and Muslims accentuates current Western suspicious views on them and serves as a reminder of their antagonistic status. Through the lens of imperfection, we expose the orientalist worldview manifested in the novel, and reveal ways to end collusion with Islamophobic sentiments.

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